‘*Playtime with* Imena’: Exploring the Importance of Social Play for Children with Down Syndrome – Trisomy 21

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts in Child and Youth Study

Department of Child & Youth Study

Mount Saint Vincent University

Submitted by:

Lea Danae Umuhoza

Date of Submission: January *2025*

Thesis Supervisor:

Dr. Mary Jane Harkins, PhD

Professor, Faculty of Education (she/her/hers)

Thesis Committee Member: **Dr. Lynn LeVatte**

Abstract

This thesis, *Playtime with Imena: Exploring the Importance of Social Play for Children with Down Syndrome – Trisomy 21*, delves into the transformative role of structured social play in promoting the holistic development and social inclusion of children with Down syndrome. Inspired by personal experiences growing up alongside Imena, a beloved sibling with Down syndrome, and later volunteering at Tubiteho—a center for children with cognitive disabilities—this study intertwines lived insights with a robust Constructivist research paradigm. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, it investigates how the microsystems of family and school, supported by community and societal structures, collectively nurture developmental outcomes through social play.

Employing a scoping review, this research synthesizes findings from diverse studies, revealing how structured social play enhances communication, social competence, and emotional resilience among children with Down syndrome. The thesis identifies a pressing need for culturally diverse, longitudinal studies and demonstrates the critical role of educator-family collaboration in maximizing the benefits of play. By examining digital tools as bridges between home and school environments, this study shows how real-time parent-teacher engagement amplifies the continuity of developmental support.

The findings offer actionable recommendations for educators, families, and policymakers, advocating for inclusive, culturally sensitive play-based interventions that champion the developmental rights of children with Down syndrome. This work underscores the profound potential of structured play as a vehicle for growth, resilience, and social belonging, aiming to shape practices and policies that empower every child to thrive.

Declaration/Statement of Originality

I hereby declare that the work presented in this thesis titled *"Play Time with Imena: Exploring the Importance of Social Play for Children with Down Syndrome – Trisomy 21"* is my own original work and has not been submitted, in whole or in part, for any other degree or qualification at any other university or institution.

I have made every effort to properly cite and credit all sources used in the research and writing of this thesis, in adherence to the academic integrity guidelines of Mount Saint Vincent University. Any use of material from external sources has been acknowledged and cited in accordance with accepted academic practices.

Signed,

Lea Danae Umuhoza

Date: January 2025

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my thesis supervisor, **Dr. Mary Jane Harkins**, for her invaluable guidance, patience, and unwavering support throughout this process. Her insightful feedback and encouragement have been instrumental in shaping the direction of this research.

I also extend my sincere thanks to **Dr. Lynn LeVatte**, my thesis committee member, for her thoughtful feedback and for challenging me to deepen my understanding of the subject matter.

This thesis is dedicated to my family, whose love and dedication have been the foundation of my academic journey. To my late father, **Dr. Naasson Munyandamutsa**, and my mother, **Professor Mukamana Donatilla**, your passion for children with Down syndrome and your unwavering commitment to founding **Tubiteho**, a center for children with cognitive disabilities, has profoundly shaped my understanding of this field. Your work has not only inspired me personally but has made a significant impact on the lives of many children and families. This research is a testament to your legacy and to the ongoing mission of advocating for the rights and inclusion of children with Down syndrome.

To my brothers, **Dr.Leonce Mwizerwa** and **Tristan Murenzi,** thank you for your constant encouragement and for being pillars of support throughout this journey. Your words of motivation and belief in me have been a driving force. And finally, to my precious little brother **Murengezi Imena Danny** who has been the heart and soul of this thesis, your strength, joy, and resilience have inspired every word of this research. You have shown me the true power of play and the limitless potential of children with Down syndrome.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to **Dr. Susan Trenholm**, Dean of Professional & Graduate Studies, for her unwavering belief in me. Her support, encouragement, and guidance have been instrumental in my journey, providing me with the confidence and determination to pursue my research. Dr. Trenholm’s dedication to student success has been an inspiration, and her kindness and insights have made a lasting impact on both my academic and personal growth.

I would also like to extend my heartfelt thanks to **Mount Saint Vincent University** for providing the platform, resources, and support necessary to carry out this research. The tools and opportunities available to me at this institution have been invaluable, allowing me to explore my passions and refine my skills in ways that will shape my future endeavors. Thank you for creating an environment where students are encouraged to thrive and reach their fullest potential.

Lastly, my sincere appreciation goes out to my friends, colleagues, and everyone who supported me along the way, whether through kind words or helpful advice. This journey would not have been possible without your encouragement.

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- DS: Down Syndrome
- EC: Early Childhood
- ECI: Early Childhood Intervention
- EST: Ecological Systems Theory
- ICT: Information and Communication Technology
- IEP: Individualized Education Plan
- IQ: Intelligence Quotient
- OT: Occupational Therapy
- PECS: Picture Exchange Communication System
- RCT: Randomized Controlled Trial
- SLP: Speech-Language Pathology
- UNICEF: United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

WHO: World Health Organization

Main Body

‘*Playtime with* Imena’: Exploring the Importance of Social Play for Children with Down Syndrome – Trisomy 21

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Background and Rationale

Some of my most cherished childhood memories are the times spent playing with my younger brothers, Imena and Murenzi. Growing up in a family of six in Kigali, Rwanda, I was the only girl among my three brothers. Imena and Murenzi were particularly close to me, being just a few years apart in age, while our older brother, Mwizerwa, was much older.

Our afternoons were filled with the simple joys of playing games like karere (soccer with a handcrafted ball), saye (hide and seek), mabigibigi (a rhythmic clapping and hopping game), and ikibariko (hopscotch). These games were more than just pastimes; they were the threads that wove our sibling bonds and created lasting memories.

One of my fondest memories is of Imena, who had not yet started school, waiting eagerly on the dining room stairs for us to come home from school. His joyful hugs and the time we spent playing together are memories I hold dear.

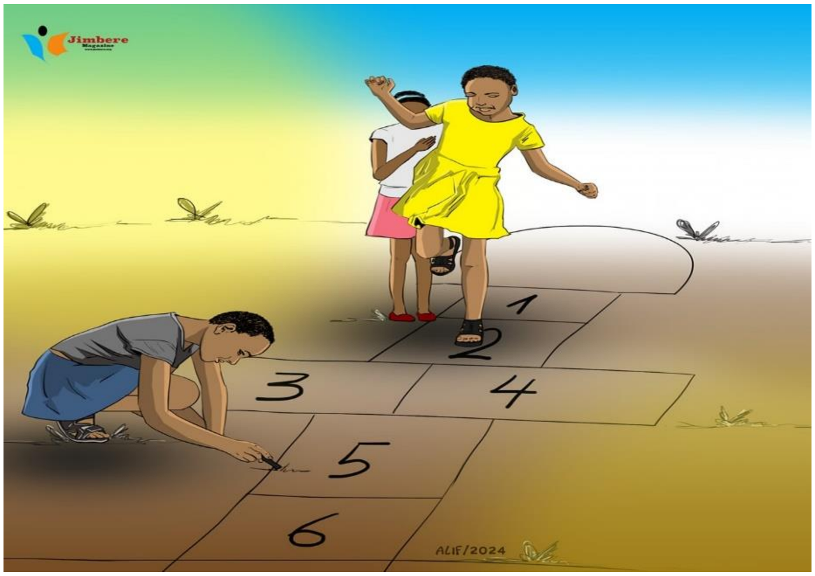

Figure 1.1: Traditional Game of Ikibariko

Source: Jimbere Magazine (n.d.). "UNICEF-supported initiative by NGO in Burundi" Facebook. URL: https://www.facebook.com/JimbereMagazine/posts/-ngo-ikibariko-cari-icabana-babakobwa-gusa-nivyo-uburundi-unicef-jimbere/890615653109097/

Figure 1.1 illustrates the traditional game of ikibariko, which involves drawing squares on the ground and hopping from one square to another, testing balance and coordination. This game became particularly significant in my interactions with Imena, as it represented not only our shared experiences but also his determination to participate fully in activities, regardless of societal expectations.

I vividly remember drawing squares for ikibariko under the clothesline with a brick. Imena, always eager to join, would say "na Imena" ("Imena too"). Although traditionally considered a "girls' game," Imena's insistence on participation defied societal norms. We drew the squares together, and I showed him how to play. Every time we finished, he would eagerly say "Twongere" (let’s do it again), and we did. Another fond memory is of playing saye (hide and seek) with my brothers and our neighbors. Imena often chose easy hiding spots, so I made sure that we hid together to last longer in the game. His big smile and laughter, which sometimes gave away our hiding spot, still resonate with me.

These afternoons of simple games revealed profound truths to me: play has no boundaries—it transcends societal rules, abilities, and expectations. Play united us, shaped our relationships, and in many ways, defined how we saw each other.

Yet, as I grew older, I began to notice that the inclusivity that defined our playtime at home did not extend beyond our yard. When I started school, Murenzi was so eager to come along that, despite not being of age, he was eventually allowed to join. However, when Imena reached the appropriate age, things were different. Our parents visited my primary school, Saint Joseph, to speak with the principal. They explained that despite their efforts, no school would accept Imena because he "would not fit in with the other children." I remember feeling confused, wondering why the world outside our home did not make room for my brother the way we did at home.

Public reactions to Imena, including unwarranted stares and mockery, were painful to witness. I recall a children's event where Imena, excited to participate, sang a song that was out of place. The laughter and mockery from other children hurt deeply. I often overheard people when walking on the street whispering, “Ariko uriya mwana niki debile” (that dumb child), which filled me with a profound sense of injustice.

It wasn’t until my parents sat me down and explained that Imena had Down syndrome, a condition caused by an extra chromosome 21 (Trisomy 21), which made it difficult for him to be accepted into mainstream schools that I started to understand the larger challenges he faced. The world viewed him differently, not because of who he was, but because of a condition he had no control over. This explanation answered many of my questions but also raised new concerns. I became increasingly aware of the challenges he faced and felt a strong urge to find ways to support him better.

In response to the lack of appropriate educational opportunities for Imena, my parents took the initiative to establish Tubiteho, a center dedicated to supporting children with cognitive disabilities, including Down syndrome. This center not only provided specialized education tailored to the needs of children like Imena but also served as a beacon of hope for other families facing similar challenges. Tubiteho became a safe space where these children could learn, grow, and thrive despite societal stigma.

Motivated by my experiences and a deep-seated passion for working with children, I began volunteering at Tubiteho at the age of 15. My involvement included assisting teachers in the classroom and engaging the children in recreational activities. Working closely with children with intellectual disabilities, I realized that play was not just a source of joy; it was a profound educational tool. Researchers such as Guralnick (2006) and Goldstein (2012) have noted that structured and unstructured play help children build social connections, develop critical skills, and express themselves in ways that traditional education often overlooks. Play is more than a childhood pastime—it is a vehicle for growth, communication, and inclusion (Guralnick, 2006; Whitman, 2018).

These experiences would shape the foundation of this thesis. Play, a seemingly simple activity, has the capacity to transform the developmental trajectories of children with Down syndrome. It promotes not only cognitive and motor skills but also social and emotional well-being, as highlighted by studies in the field of developmental disabilities (Presson et al., 2013;

Guralnick, 2017). This thesis seeks to explore how play—particularly social play—can contribute to the holistic development of children with Down syndrome. I aim to provide insights into how educators and caregivers can harness the power of play to support the development of these children in inclusive environments (Goldstein, 2012).

Through this research, I hope to fill a significant gap in understanding how play can be strategically employed as a tool for social integration and emotional development for children with Down syndrome. My journey, from those early afternoons playing with Imena to my volunteer work at Tubiteho, has convinced me that play is not merely a child's activity—it is a lifeline to their potential. This thesis is my effort to explore that lifeline and share the profound lessons play offers for children like Imena and beyond (Whitman, 2018).

1.2 Introduction to the Study

This research, deeply rooted in my personal experiences, seeks to explore the critical role of structured social play in the development and social inclusion of children with Down syndrome. Structured play refers to organized, purposeful play activities that are designed to promote interaction, communication, and collaboration among children (Guralnick, 2006).

The lack of opportunities for children with Down syndrome to participate fully in social play both at school and within their communities remains a significant issue. In many cases, these children are marginalized due to the belief that they cannot fully engage in such activities (National Down Syndrome Society, n.d.). This thesis aims to investigate how structured play activities, which are carefully designed to support children's specific developmental needs, can foster greater social inclusion and holistic development (Guralnick, 2017).

By examining a wide range of academic sources including studies on play-based learning, inclusive education, and collaboration between parents and educators, the study investigates how structured play interventions contribute to the holistic development of children with Down syndrome. In addition to this academic research, the analysis of the findings provides further insights into the real-world impact of these interventions.

This study seeks to offer a deeper understanding of how structured social play can be used to support cognitive, emotional, and social growth for children with Down syndrome, ultimately promoting their inclusion and well-being (Guralnick, 2006; Goldstein, 2012).

While children with Down syndrome may face developmental challenges in areas such as speech, motor skills, and social interaction, these difficulties also highlight the importance of supportive, engaging environments that foster their growth. One such environment is social play, which not only serves as a recreational activity but also offers significant developmental benefits (Guralnick, 2017).

Understanding the potential of social play to promote the holistic development of children with Down syndrome requires a deeper examination of the condition itself. By exploring the physical and developmental characteristics of Down syndrome, we can better understand how targeted interventions, such as structured play activities, can address specific challenges and support overall growth. As Guralnick (2006) emphasizes, play is critical in fostering social and cognitive development, particularly for children with developmental disabilities. With this foundation, the following section will provide a detailed overview of Down syndrome, shedding light on the developmental and health considerations that inform the role of social play in fostering inclusion and well-being for these children.

1.3 Understanding Down Syndrome

Down syndrome, first identified by Dr. John Langdon Down in 1866, results from an extra copy of chromosome 21, also known as **Trisomy 21**. This genetic condition causes a variety of physical and developmental characteristics, including a flat facial profile, almond-shaped eyes, low muscle tone, and short stature. Children with Down syndrome often experience delays in areas such as speech, motor skills, and social interaction.

Intellectual disability associated with Down syndrome typically ranges from mild to moderate, affecting cognitive development, speech, and social skills. Additionally, children with Down syndrome face a higher risk of congenital health issues, including heart defects, respiratory problems, and hearing impairments (Mayo Clinic Staff, 2021; National Down Syndrome Society, n.d.).

Despite these challenges, children with Down syndrome can grow into independent, active adults, especially with early intervention and appropriate support systems (Presson et al., 2013).

Table 1.1: Common Characteristics of Down Syndrome

Note. Information adapted from the National Down Syndrome Society (n.d.) and Bull et al. (2011).

Characteristic	Description
Physical Traits	Flat facial profile, almond-shaped eyes
Motor Skills	Low muscle tone, short stature
Intellectual Disability	Mild to moderate cognitive delays

Congenital Health Issues	Heart defects, respiratory issues, etc.

While these characteristics present challenges, it is equally important to focus on how to support children with Down syndrome in their developmental journey. One such avenue of support is through **social play**, which plays a pivotal role in their overall growth and inclusion.

1.4 Understanding Social Play

Social play is characterized by collaborative interactions and role-playing among peers, and it is a fundamental component of child development. For children with Down syndrome, social play provides crucial opportunities to develop communication, cooperation, and empathy. These interactions are essential not only for recreation but also for cognitive development, emotional regulation, and physical coordination (Guralnick, 2006).

Play serves as the primary means by which children explore the world around them, experiment with social roles, and express their emotions and creativity (Goldstein, 2012). In the context of children with Down syndrome, social play allows for the development of skills that might otherwise be difficult to foster in more formal educational settings. Play offers a supportive environment where children are free to explore social dynamics, express themselves, and interact with others at their own pace (Whitman, 2018).

As we recognize the importance of structured social play, it is crucial to ask key questions about its role in fostering development and social inclusion, particularly for children with Down syndrome. The next section outlines the central research questions that will guide this exploration.

1.5 Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions, which aim to explore how structured social play interventions can enhance the development and social inclusion of children with Down syndrome:

Main Research Question:

- How can explicit, structured social play interventions contribute to the social inclusion of children with Down syndrome?

Sub-questions:

- What are the key components of social play that contribute to the development of children with Down syndrome?
- How can peer-mediated interventions improve social interactions among children with Down syndrome?
- What roles do Early Childhood (EC) educators and parents play in facilitating collaborative social play interventions?

By answering these questions, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how structured play can promote positive developmental outcomes. The significance of these findings will be discussed next, as they relate to gaps in current research and their potential to shape educational and developmental practices.

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study seeks to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on the developmental benefits of structured social play for children with Down syndrome. Existing research highlights the importance of social play in fostering communication, social competence, and emotional regulation in children with developmental disabilities (Guralnick, 2017). However, several gaps in the literature remain that this study aims to address.

Firstly, there is a lack of longitudinal studies that explore the long-term impacts of structured social play interventions. While short-term benefits, such as improved peer interaction and emotional regulation, are well-documented, little is known about the sustainability of these developmental gains over time. This study aims to shed light on whether structured play interventions can produce lasting effects that continue as children grow older.

Secondly, most studies focus on homogeneous populations, often neglecting the diverse experiences of children from different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. This lack of diversity limits the generalizability of findings and creates a need for research that explores how structured play interventions can be adapted and applied in multicultural contexts. This study will offer a unique perspective on how cultural factors influence the implementation and outcomes of play-based interventions.

Finally, the study addresses the need for collaboration between early childhood educators and families in supporting the social inclusion of children with Down syndrome. While research has acknowledged the importance of family-educator partnerships, there is limited guidance on how structured play interventions can be effectively designed and implemented through collaborative efforts. This study aims to provide evidence on how educators and parents can work together to foster inclusive, play-based learning environments that promote the holistic development of children with Down syndrome (Whitman, 2018).

In addition to filling these gaps, this study has practical significance. The findings will offer evidence-based recommendations for educators, caregivers, and policymakers on how to implement structured social play interventions that are inclusive, culturally relevant, and developmentally appropriate. By emphasizing the role of play as a critical tool for cognitive, emotional, and social growth, this research has the potential to shape educational practices and influence policies that support the inclusion and well-being of children with Down syndrome.

The significance of this study is the identification of critical gaps in the literature, particularly the need for longitudinal studies, additional culturally inclusive research, and effective collaboration strategies between educators and families. By focusing on how structured social play can support the development of children with Down syndrome, this study seeks to provide insights into the importance of targeted interventions that foster holistic growth in their cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development.

In this chapter, I have explored the significance of structured social play in supporting the development and social inclusion of children with Down syndrome. Drawing on existing research, I have highlighted the developmental challenges these children face, including cognitive delays, difficulties in social interactions, and increased health risks (Presson et al., 2013; Mayo Clinic Staff, 2021). Furthermore, I have outlined the key research questions guiding this study, focusing on how structured social play interventions may address these developmental needs.

In the following chapter I provide a comprehensive review of the literature surrounding social play and its developmental impact, for children with Down syndrome. By examining existing studies on structured play interventions, educator and family collaboration, and cultural adaptations, this review provides the theoretical foundation for this area of research and identifies gaps in the current knowledge (Guralnick, 2006; Whitman, 2018). This analysis supports the rationale for further investigation into the long-term impacts of structured social play and the role of diverse cultural contexts in shaping these interventions.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Play is a vital component of early childhood development, significantly contributing to growth across cognitive, emotional, social, and physical domains. It is through play that children not only engage in recreation but also explore their environments, solve problems, and learn essential social roles and relationships (Goldstein, 2012). As children play, they construct knowledge and develop cognitive schemas, which are frameworks that help them understand and interpret the world around them. This process is crucial for building emotional resilience, making play fundamental to overall development (Catron & Allen, 2008; Pellegrini, 2009).

Research in early childhood education highlights two primary forms of play: unstructured (or free) play and structured play. Unstructured play allows children the freedom to explore, create, and invent their own rules, promoting creativity, autonomy, and self-regulation (Vygotsky, 1978). This form of play is essential for fostering intrinsic motivation and encouraging children to express themselves in unique ways, which is critical for developing their identities.

In contrast, structured play consists of organized activities with specific goals or rules, which have been shown to facilitate targeted developmental outcomes. For instance, structured play can enhance language acquisition, improve problem-solving abilities, and foster social cooperation (Ginsburg, 2007; Weikart, 1998). This form of play is particularly beneficial for children with developmental challenges, as it provides a supportive environment in which they can practice essential social and cognitive skills in a more predictable and guided manner.

For children with Intellectual and developmental disabilities, such as Down syndrome, structured play creates a scaffolded environment that encourages purposeful interactions. Within this context, children can gain confidence, develop critical social skills, and enhance their emotional competencies. Moreover, structured play activities can be tailored to meet individual developmental needs, ensuring that all children have the opportunity to engage meaningfully with their peers and caregivers (Sullivan & Doran, 2020).

This literature review explores how social play, particularly structured social play, serves as a developmental tool for children with Down syndrome. It will highlight the myriad benefits these interventions can provide, such as promoting social inclusion, enhancing communication skills, and supporting emotional well-being, while also addressing the challenges that educators and families may encounter in implementing these strategies.

By examining existing research, this review aims to underscore the critical role of play in early childhood development, particularly for children with special needs, and to advocate for the integration of structured play within inclusive educational settings.

2.2 Social Play and Children with Developmental Disabilities

Understanding Social Play in Early Childhood Development

Social play is integral to early childhood development, enabling children to engage in shared activities that foster communication, emotional regulation, and problem-solving skills (Gray, 2017). In this context, social play encompasses group activities such as role-playing, cooperative games, and collaborative storytelling. Through these interactions, children practice essential skills, such as turn-taking, conflict resolution, and perspective-taking, which are vital for their social and emotional growth (Goldstein, 2012).

Moreover, social play facilitates the development of executive functions, including planning, decision-making, and impulse control—skills critical for academic success and navigating social interactions (Berk, 2013). The benefits of social play extend beyond immediate social gains; the skills children acquire during these interactions significantly influence their future relationships and social competence (Catron & Allen, 2008).

While social play benefits all children, its importance is amplified for those with developmental disabilities, such as Down syndrome. Children with Down syndrome encounter specific challenges in communication and social interaction, making structured social play particularly beneficial in helping them navigate and understand social relationships. This transition sets the stage for a deeper exploration of how structured social play serves as a developmental tool for children with Down syndrome.

Research indicates that children with Down syndrome frequently encounter developmental delays in communication, motor skills, and cognitive processing, complicating typical social play interactions ((American Academy of Pediatrics, 2023). Therefore, structured social play becomes a critical developmental tool, offering carefully designed environments where children can practice and refine their social skills with appropriate support and guidance.

For instance, Kasari et al. (2012) demonstrated that structured social play interventions led to significant improvements in peer interactions, emotional regulation, and communication skills among children with Down syndrome. These interventions typically involved peer-mediated activities that encouraged turn-taking and joint attention, social skills that can be particularly challenging for children with Down syndrome in unstructured settings.

Additionally, social play offers children with Down syndrome the opportunity to develop a theory of mind—the understanding that others have different thoughts and emotions—which is essential for navigating complex social environments (Diamond & Hong, 2010). Structured play creates a safe space for practicing these skills, allowing children to learn through trial and error, a vital aspect of their developmental journey. As we delve further, it is essential to understand the specific role of structured social play for children with Down syndrome.

The Role of Structured Social Play for Children with Down Syndrome

Structured social play is particularly beneficial for children with Down syndrome, as it provides clear goals, boundaries, and supports that facilitate learning and engagement. Guralnick et al. (2011) found that structured play activities, including guided role-play and cooperative problem-solving tasks, significantly enhanced social competence in children with Down syndrome. The presence of clear instructions and adult facilitation enabled these children to participate more actively in social play, leading to improved communication with peers and stronger peer relationships.

Another successful case study conducted by Odom et al. (2013) highlighted how structured play interventions in inclusive classrooms fostered greater peer acceptance and social engagement for children with Down syndrome. By involving typically developing peers in the play, children with Down syndrome were able to engage in reciprocal social interactions, learning social norms and behaviors through observation and imitation. These findings underscore the importance of integrating structured play into educational settings for children with developmental disabilities.

Structured social play activities often include elements such as peer modeling, turn-taking, and cooperative games. For instance, in structured storytelling activities, children collaborate to build narratives, allowing those with Down syndrome to enhance their language skills and social understanding while receiving real-time feedback and support from both peers and educators (Guralnick et al., 2011). This collaborative aspect highlights the multifaceted benefits of structured social play, paving the way for further exploration of existing research that underscores the effectiveness of these interventions for children with Down syndrome. Next, we will review existing research that highlights the effectiveness of structured social play interventions for children with Down syndrome**.**

Previous Research on Social Play Interventions

Previous research has explored various approaches to structured social play interventions, all aiming to improve specific developmental outcomes for children with Down syndrome. These studies demonstrate the effectiveness of structured play in enhancing communication, social integration, and cognitive development:

Table 2.1: Previous Research on Social Play Interventions

Intervention Type	Objective	Sample Size	Duration	Measured Outcomes	References
Structured Play Programs	Improve social communication	45	12 weeks	Increased communication skills, better peer interactions	Kasari et al. (2012)
Inclusive Classroom Settings	Promote social integration	60	1 academic year	Enhanced social competence, improved academic achievement	Buckley et al. (2006); Guralnick (2010)
Parent-Child Interaction	Strengthen parent-child bond	30	8 weeks	Improved emotional regulation, increased empathy	Schneider et al. (2011)

These interventions underscore the significant role that structured social play can play in the development of children with Down syndrome, providing opportunities for skill enhancement and social inclusion. Despite the promising outcomes, it is crucial to address the challenges and limitations associated with these interventions.

Challenges and Limitations of Social Play for Children with Down Syndrome

Despite the clear benefits of structured social play, several challenges persist. Children with Down syndrome exhibit a wide variability in their developmental trajectories, with some excelling in social contexts while others struggle with basic communication or motor skills. Fidler et al. (2011) emphasize that this heterogeneity can complicate educators' efforts to design universally accessible play activities for all children with Down syndrome.

Environmental barriers also present significant challenges. McGregor et al. (2015) observed that many inclusive play settings are not physically or socially accessible to children with disabilities. For instance, playgrounds may lack the necessary adaptations for children with motor difficulties, and social exclusion by peers can further limit participation in play. Recognizing these challenges leads us to consider effective strategies for addressing them.

Addressing the Challenges of Social Play

Addressing the developmental challenges associated with Down syndrome necessitates a collaborative approach involving educators, therapists, and parents. A key tool in this collaboration is the Individual Program Plan (IPP), also referred to as the Individualized Education Plan (IEP), or for preschoolers, the Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP). These plans allow for customized interventions tailored to meet the specific developmental needs of children with Down syndrome. Through IPPs, specific social goals can be established, and individualized strategies can be implemented across home and school environments. According to the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2016a), IPPs are designed to reflect the strengths and needs of students, ensuring a structured and targeted approach to support.

To maximize the success of social play interventions, schools must foster inclusive environments by training educators to facilitate structured play and adapting physical spaces to accommodate children with diverse abilities. Suggested adaptations include sensory-friendly play equipment and inclusive group activities that promote participation for all children. The Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2016b) emphasizes the importance of tailoring program plans and learning environments to address the strengths and challenges of individual students. Furthermore, cultural diversity and contextual factors should be considered, as they significantly impact social play and inclusion. Notably, the department's 2016 review identified systemic barriers, such as the disproportionate placement of African Nova Scotian and Indigenous students on IPPs, underscoring the need for equitable and culturally responsive practices (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2016a).

By integrating these considerations into IPPs, educators can foster more effective, inclusive, and culturally responsive strategies that holistically support children with Down syndrome.

Cultural Diversity and Contextual Factors in Social Play

The implementation of social play interventions is not uniform across different cultures. Cultural norms influence how play is perceived and the types of play that are encouraged. For instance, in collectivist cultures such as those in East Asia or Sub-Saharan Africa, social play may emphasize group cooperation and social harmony, while individualistic cultures may prioritize personal expression and creativity in play (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2013).

Roopnarine et al. (2013) demonstrated the impact of culturally adapted structured play in an early childhood setting in Trinidad. The intervention involved traditional group games that emphasized cooperation and role-sharing, which aligned with the community's cultural values. This culturally sensitive approach fostered a greater sense of inclusion and engagement for children with developmental disabilities.

Incorporating cultural sensitivity into play interventions can greatly enhance the success of social play activities. Roopnarine and Johnson (2013) highlight the importance of adapting play-based interventions to the cultural context of the children being served, ensuring that local traditions and norms are respected. By understanding the unique barriers posed by different social and physical environments, educators can design more effective, inclusive play strategies that address both developmental needs and cultural expectations (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2013). In conclusion, recognizing the significance of structured social play is essential for promoting the development and social inclusion of children with Down syndrome.

Recognizing the significance of structured social play is essential for promoting the development and social inclusion of children with Down syndrome. However, to maximize the effectiveness of these interventions, collaboration among various stakeholders is crucial. The next section will explore the role of collaboration in ensuring the success of social play interventions for children with Down syndrome, highlighting its essential components and potential barriers.

2.3 Collaboration for Effective Social Play Interventions

Collaboration is not just beneficial but essential for the success of social play interventions tailored for children with Down syndrome, as it fosters a shared commitment to holistic development. However, the term "collaboration" is often oversimplified in educational discourse. True collaboration transcends mere teamwork; it entails mutual engagement, shared decision-making, and ongoing dialogue among all stakeholders, including educators, families, and professionals (Topping, 2005; Friend & Cook, 2010).

In many cases, collaboration is mistakenly conflated with cooperation or coordination. Cooperation typically refers to individuals working together toward a common goal but with separate responsibilities. For example, in a classroom setting, a teacher might design a lesson plan while a parent assists with logistics. Coordination, on the other hand, involves organizing activities and resources to avoid overlap or inefficiency—such as scheduling meetings or ensuring that educational materials are available (Friend & Cook, 2010). While both cooperation and coordination are important, true collaboration requires a deeper level of involvement, where all parties engage in shared problem-solving and jointly create strategies for intervention.

True collaboration in the context of supporting children with Down syndrome involves a dynamic and reciprocal relationship among educators, parents, therapists, and other stakeholders. According to Hargreaves (2010), authentic collaboration is built on trust, mutual respect, and equality between all participants. Each party brings unique expertise to the table—educators contribute professional knowledge about child development and pedagogy, while parents provide invaluable insights into the child’s strengths, needs, and everyday experiences.

Hargreaves (2010) also warns against "contrived collegiality," a form of superficial collaboration that can occur when collaboration is merely a formality or a box-ticking exercise. For instance, if a school mandates quarterly meetings where parents' input is solicited but not genuinely considered, it undermines the collaborative process. This type of superficial collaboration can prevent the development of authentic partnerships essential for supporting children with Down syndrome (Hargreaves, 2010).

Barriers to Effective Collaboration

Despite the clear benefits of collaboration, achieving it is often challenging. One common barrier is miscommunication, as educators and parents often come from different perspectives—educators may prioritize academic or social goals, while parents might focus on practical concerns such as the child's daily functioning or emotional well-being (Guralnick et al., 2011). For example, a teacher may emphasize the importance of social skills for academic success, while a parent may prioritize the child's emotional security in social situations.

Additionally, time constraints and resource limitations can hinder collaboration. Many educators, particularly those in inclusive classrooms, are already stretched thin with managing large class sizes and diverse student needs. They may not have the time or resources to engage in regular, in-depth collaboration with every child's parents (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). Conversely, parents, especially those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or non-English-speaking households, may struggle to participate fully due to work schedules, language barriers, or a lack of understanding of educational jargon (Blue-Banning et al., 2004).

There are also challenges related to power dynamics. In some cases, collaboration may be undermined by implicit hierarchies, where educators or professionals see themselves as the primary decision-makers and parents as passive recipients of their expertise. For instance, if a school team disregards a parent's suggestions about their child's intervention plan, it can leave the parent feeling undervalued and disconnected from the process (Epstein, 2018). To overcome these barriers, it is crucial to create an atmosphere of trust, transparency, and equal participation, where all parties feel empowered to contribute their insights and expertise (Epstein, 2018).

The Importance of Collaboration in Supporting Children with Down Syndrome

For children with Down syndrome, effective collaboration between educators and families is especially important because it ensures that interventions are consistently reinforced across different environments—home, school, and community. Structured social play interventions, for example, are most effective when the goals and strategies developed in the classroom are also implemented at home. This level of consistency helps children with Down syndrome develop and generalize the social and communication skills they are working on in multiple contexts (Venuti et al., 2009).

A successful collaborative model might include regular meetings between educators and parents to discuss the child's progress, challenges, and areas for improvement. For example, schools could organize bi-weekly meetings that focus on specific goals, such as improving turn-taking skills during play. These meetings should not only emphasize what the child is learning at school but also how those lessons can be reinforced in the home environment. Parents can provide valuable feedback about what strategies are working at home, and educators can adjust classroom activities accordingly (Venuti et al., 2009).

Moreover, collaboration should not be limited to parents and educators. Other professionals, such as speech therapists, occupational therapists, and psychologists, should also be involved in the collaborative process. Interdisciplinary collaboration brings together diverse expertise to create more holistic and comprehensive intervention plans that address the child's full range of needs (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). For instance, a speech therapist might work with both educators and parents to ensure that communication strategies are consistently used across all settings.

Research by Epstein (2018) highlights the benefits of collaborative models where parents and educators engage in joint decision-making, shared goal-setting, and mutual support. These models have been shown to improve not only the child's social and cognitive outcomes but also the overall relationship between the family and the school. For instance, in schools that implement family engagement initiatives, children often exhibit increased motivation and better academic performance (Epstein, 2018).

However, Guralnick et al. (2011) found that collaboration is often hindered by a lack of clear communication, differing expectations, and insufficient training for educators on how to build partnerships with families. To address these issues, schools must provide professional development for educators on fostering effective collaboration, particularly in inclusive settings. This training should emphasize the importance of listening to parents' concerns, recognizing their expertise, and ensuring that they have an equal voice in decision-making processes (Guralnick et al., 2011).

Another study by Kasari et al. (2012) found that children with Down syndrome who benefited from strong collaboration between their parents and teachers showed greater improvements in social skills, emotional regulation, and overall developmental outcomes compared to those whose parents and educators had limited communication or collaboration. For example, children in collaborative settings demonstrated more significant progress in initiating interactions with peers, leading to enhanced social skills (Kasari et al., 2012). This finding underscores the importance of building strong, trusting relationships between all stakeholders to support the child's development.

Collaboration is a critical yet often misunderstood component of effective social play interventions for children with Down syndrome. True collaboration goes beyond cooperation or coordination—it involves deep, reciprocal relationships where all stakeholders contribute equally to the decision-making process. While barriers such as miscommunication, power imbalances, and time constraints can impede collaboration, addressing these challenges through open communication, mutual respect, and shared responsibility can lead to more effective interventions and better developmental outcomes for children with Down syndrome.

By fostering authentic, trust-based partnerships between educators, families, and other professionals, social play interventions can be tailored to meet the unique needs of each child, ensuring consistency and maximizing developmental gains across different contexts.

Understanding the significant role of structured social play in the development of children with Down syndrome highlights the need for a robust theoretical framework to guide our exploration of this complex topic. The previous discussions have illustrated how social play serves as a crucial mechanism for fostering communication, social interaction, and emotional regulation among children with developmental disabilities. However, to fully grasp the intricacies of these interactions and their broader implications, it is essential to situate our findings within a comprehensive theoretical context.

In this regard, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory provides a valuable lens through which we can analyze the multifaceted influences on child development, particularly for those with special needs. This theoretical framework emphasizes the interplay between individual characteristics and various environmental systems, ranging from immediate settings such as families and schools to broader societal influences. By applying Bronfenbrenner's model, we can better understand how structured social play interventions can be designed and implemented to optimize developmental outcomes for children with Down syndrome.

In the following section, we will delve into the theoretical underpinnings of this research by conducting a scoping review that examines existing literature through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, thus paving the way for a deeper understanding of how structured play can be effectively integrated into the developmental trajectories of children with developmental disabilities.

2.4 Theoretical Framework: Scoping Review and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

2.4.1 Scoping Review Methodology

The methodology adopted for this study is a scoping review, a systematic approach particularly effective for synthesizing research across broad and multifaceted areas. Unlike systematic reviews, which are designed to answer specific research questions through stringent inclusion criteria, scoping reviews map the literature on a given topic, identifying knowledge gaps that warrant further investigation (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Munn et al., 2018). This methodology is especially suited for understanding the role of structured social play interventions for children with Down syndrome, as it allows for the inclusion of diverse research designs, methodologies, and perspectives.

The foundation for this scoping review encompasses several critical steps:

1. **Identifying the Research Question**: The primary focus of this review is the question, "How do structured social play interventions support the development of children with Down syndrome?" This question aligns with the overarching goal of exploring how these interventions can enhance developmental outcomes, particularly in social and cognitive domains.
2. **Searching Relevant Studies**: Comprehensive searches were conducted across databases such as ERIC, PubMed, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar for peer-reviewed studies published between 2000 and 2024. Keywords like "Down syndrome," "social play," "early childhood education," and "interventions" were utilized to capture a wide range of relevant literature. Additionally, grey literature, including conference proceedings and dissertations, was considered to enrich the breadth of the review.
3. **Selecting Studies**: Studies were selected based on predefined inclusion criteria, focusing on those that addressed children with Down syndrome, social play interventions, and early childhood education. Research that did not meet these criteria or that primarily focused on other disabilities was excluded from consideration. This careful selection process ensured that the review comprehensively represented relevant findings.
4. **Charting the Data**: Data extracted from the selected studies were organized into themes, including the role of Early Childhood (EC) educators, the impact of social play interventions, and the collaboration between educators and families. Thematic analysis facilitated a nuanced understanding of the findings, while quantitative data were summarized to highlight key metrics of intervention effectiveness.
5. **Collating and Summarizing Findings**: The findings were analyzed to identify key trends in the literature, such as the crucial role of structured social play in fostering cognitive and social development. Key studies, including those by Cummings et al.

(2016) and Pons et al. (2021), highlighted the effectiveness of structured play interventions in enhancing communication, social skills, and peer relationships among children with Down syndrome. Gaps were identified, particularly regarding the need for longitudinal research examining the long-term impacts of social play interventions (Peters et al., 2015).

The scoping review methodology enables a broad exploration of how social play has been studied across different contexts. By incorporating both qualitative and quantitative studies, this approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the developmental impacts of social play interventions for children with Down syndrome. Notably, it reveals critical gaps in the existing literature, particularly the scarcity of long-term studies on the sustainability of developmental gains achieved through structured social play interventions (Peters et al., 2015).

2.4.2 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Complementing the scoping review, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) provides a robust theoretical framework for understanding how children with Down syndrome develop within their environmental contexts. This theory underscores the multiple layers of environmental influences on child development, ranging from the child's immediate surroundings (microsystem) to broader societal influences (macrosystem).

Bronfenbrenner's theory is particularly useful for understanding how structured social play is shaped by interactions at various levels:

- **Microsystem**: Direct interactions with peers, educators, and family members during structured play activities are pivotal for the social and cognitive development of children with Down syndrome. Structured social play, facilitated by EC educators, offers opportunities for practicing essential social skills, such as communication, empathy, and cooperation (Guralnick, 2006). For instance, structured play settings in schools are critical for helping children with Down syndrome forge relationships and engage in meaningful peer interactions (Buckley et al., 2006). Research indicates that inclusive play settings can significantly enhance children's social initiation and response skills (Ginsburg, 2007).

- **Mesosystem**: This system focuses on the interconnections between different microsystems, such as the home and school environments. For children with Down syndrome, collaboration between educators and families is essential for reinforcing structured social play interventions across these contexts. Research by Kasari et al. (2012) indicates that when educators and parents collaborate to support structured play activities, children experience enhanced developmental outcomes. Additionally, studies by McWilliam et al. (2017) highlight the importance of family involvement in promoting social skills during play, leading to increased engagement and positive peer relationships.

- **Exosystem**: Factors that indirectly influence the child's development, such as institutional policies and community resources, fall under the exosystem. School policies that promote inclusive education and provide access to specialized play programs for children with Down syndrome can significantly enhance the availability of structured social play opportunities. Diamond and Hong (2010) found that inclusive education policies help mitigate stigmatization and foster participation in structured play, leading to improved social integration for children with Down syndrome. Furthermore, community resources that provide accessible play spaces and trained personnel can enhance the effectiveness of these interventions (Bailey et al., 2018).

- **Macrosystem**: At the macrosystem level, societal attitudes, cultural beliefs, and policy frameworks shape the overall environment in which children develop. Societal norms surrounding disability and inclusion profoundly impact the extent to which children with Down syndrome have access to inclusive play opportunities. Landsdown (2014) emphasizes that societies valuing inclusivity are more likely to implement policies and programs that promote social play and integration for children with developmental disabilities. Moreover, cultural perceptions of disability can either hinder or facilitate access to structured play activities, affecting the overall developmental trajectory for children with Down syndrome (Kauffman, 2018).

- **Chronosystem**: This system addresses the influence of time on a child's development, including life transitions and socio-historical changes. For children with Down syndrome, longitudinal studies are vital for understanding how structured social play interventions influence development over time. Changes in family structure, school settings, or societal attitudes toward inclusion can significantly impact the long-term effectiveness of these interventions (Kasari et al., 2012). Research by Guralnick (2011) suggests that sustained participation in social play over time correlates with improved adaptive functioning and quality of life in children with Down syndrome.

By applying Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, this study offers a holistic perspective on the various environmental factors influencing the effectiveness of structured social play interventions for children with Down syndrome. The theory underscores the importance of considering not only immediate interactions within the child's microsystem but also the broader social, cultural, and institutional contexts that shape these interactions.

2.4.3 Integration of Scoping Review and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

The integration of the scoping review methodology and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how structured social play interventions operate across different environmental contexts and how these contexts influence the development of children with Down syndrome. While the scoping review identifies key trends and gaps in the existing literature, Bronfenbrenner's theory offers a detailed explanation of how various environmental systems interact to shape developmental outcomes.

For instance, the scoping review highlights the critical role of structured play in enhancing communication skills and social competence among children with Down syndrome. Concurrently, Bronfenbrenner's theory elucidates how these developmental gains are influenced by interactions within the child's immediate environment (microsystem), collaboration between parents and educators (mesosystem), and broader institutional and societal factors (exosystem and macrosystem).

Together, these frameworks emphasize the necessity for a multi-layered approach to understanding the developmental impacts of structured social play. They also underscore the need for further research, particularly longitudinal studies exploring how structured play interventions influence development over time (chronosystem) and across diverse cultural and socioeconomic contexts (macrosystem). By adopting this comprehensive lens, the study seeks to analyze advance understanding of the complex interplay between structured social play and child development for children with Down syndrome, ultimately contributing to more effective interventions and improved outcomes.

In conclusion, this literature review highlights the critical role of structured social play in fostering the holistic development of children with Down syndrome. Utilizing Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, we see how various environmental factors and interactions influence children's growth and learning. The evidence suggests that social play not only enhances key developmental areas such as communication, social skills, and emotional regulation but also promotes social inclusion and a sense of belonging within diverse settings.

However, this review also identifies significant gaps in the current research landscape. The limited availability of longitudinal studies and culturally diverse perspectives poses challenges in fully understanding the nuances of social play interventions. Additionally, the exploration of educators' experiences and the collaborative dynamics between families and schools requires further investigation to improve the implementation of effective strategies.

These insights are pivotal as I move into the next chapter, where I will detail my research design and methodology. Acknowledging my positionality as a researcher, shaped by my personal experiences and commitment to advocating for children with cognitive disabilities, is essential. This chapter will outline the constructivist paradigm guiding my inquiry and the qualitative secondary data analysis approach I will employ to explore the impact of structured social play interventions. The findings will contribute valuable knowledge to the field and inform best practices for supporting children with Down syndrome through play.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

3.1 Research Paradigm: Constructivism

This study adopts a Constructivist paradigm, which emphasizes the active role of individuals in constructing their understanding and knowledge of the world through interactions and experiences. Constructivism, as articulated by Piaget (1970) and Vygotsky (1978), posits that knowledge is not a passive reception but an active process where individuals build understanding through their experiences and social interactions.

Constructivism aligns well with the exploration of social play as a developmental tool for children with Down syndrome. This paradigm facilitates an understanding of how children actively engage in and interpret their social interactions, thus providing insights into how structured social play interventions impact their cognitive, social, and emotional development. Furthermore, this approach informs the study's methodology by guiding the analysis of how children's interactions with peers and educators in play settings contribute to their developmental trajectories. The emphasis on active construction of learning through play will influence both the design of the study and the interpretation of the data, ensuring a focus on the dynamic processes of learning and development.

3.2 Research Approach and Justification

This research employs a qualitative approach, specifically secondary data analysis, to investigate the impact of structured social play on children with Down syndrome. A qualitative approach is chosen because it allows for a deep exploration of existing research, providing rich, detailed insights into how social play interventions affect developmental outcomes without the challenges associated with primary data collection (Creswell, 2014). By synthesizing diverse studies, this method offers a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of social play interventions and highlights any gaps or inconsistencies in the current literature (Fetters et al., 2013).

However, it is essential to acknowledge potential limitations associated with secondary data analysis. The reliability of findings is contingent upon the quality and methodological rigor of the original studies. To address these limitations, a systematic evaluation framework will be employed to assess the robustness of each study's design, including factors such as sample size, data collection methods, and analysis techniques. This ensures that the findings synthesized in this research are grounded in reliable evidence, thereby enhancing the credibility of the conclusions drawn.

3.3 Participants and Sampling Methods

Since this study relies on secondary data, the participants are those included in the original studies from which data will be extracted. The sampling method involves selecting relevant studies that meet specific inclusion criteria.

Inclusion Criteria:

- Studies that focus on social play and its impact on children with Down syndrome.
- Research that includes data on social, cognitive, emotional outcomes, and collaboration.
- Peer-reviewed articles and reputable reports published within the last 25 years.
- Studies published in English.

Sampling Procedure:

A systematic search will be conducted in academic databases such as PubMed, PsycINFO, and ERIC using keywords related to social play, Down syndrome, educator-family collaboration, and developmental outcomes. Abstracts and full texts will be reviewed to ensure they meet the inclusion criteria. Studies will be selected based on their relevance, methodological rigor, and alignment with the research questions. The inclusion of studies from the last 25 years ensures that the research reflects the most current understanding of social play interventions. Only English-language studies will be included to maintain consistency in data interpretation and analysis.

3.4 Data Collection Methods

Data for this study will be collected from various sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles and grey literature (e.g., reports, government documents).

Data Collection Process:

- Perform systematic literature searches in academic databases to identify relevant studies.
- Apply inclusion criteria to filter studies, ensuring relevance and quality.
- Extract data related to structured social play interventions and their impact on children with Down syndrome, focusing on both quantitative and qualitative findings.

Sources:

- **Peer-Reviewed Journal Articles:** Provide validated research findings.
- **Grey Literature:** Includes reports and documents from reputable organizations that offer additional insights into social play interventions. To ensure the quality of grey literature, it will be evaluated based on the credibility of the source and relevance to the research

questions. Discrepancies between findings in peer-reviewed and grey literature will be addressed through careful analysis and cross-referencing.

3.5 Data Analysis Plan

The analysis of secondary data will involve several systematic steps to ensure comprehensive and rigorous findings.

Steps in Data Analysis:

- **Data Extraction:** Key information from the selected studies will be extracted, focusing on intervention types, outcomes, and methodological details. This process involves creating a structured data extraction form to ensure consistency and accuracy across the data collected.
- **Thematic Analysis:** A thematic analysis will be conducted to identify recurring themes, patterns, and gaps within the data. This involves coding the data and grouping it into meaningful categories to derive insights (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To ensure reliability and consistency, thematic coding will be regularly reviewed , allowing for the identification of significant patterns and trends.
- **Comparative Analysis:** A comparative analysis will evaluate the consistency and variability of findings across different studies related to social play interventions (Denzin, 1978). This step involves comparing how different studies address similar research questions and identifying any discrepancies or variations in the results.
- **Synthesis:** Findings will be synthesized to provide a comprehensive understanding of how structured social play interventions impact children with Down syndrome. This synthesis will be guided by the research questions and objectives, emphasizing

developmental outcomes and the role of educator-family collaboration. Conflicting findings will be analyzed thoroughly to offer a balanced and nuanced view of the evidence.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Despite relying on secondary data, ethical considerations remain crucial to ensure the integrity and respect for original research.

Ethical Guidelines:

- **Informed Consent:** Direct informed consent from participants in the original studies is not applicable as this study uses secondary data. However, ethical guidelines for secondary research will be followed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
- **Data Confidentiality:** Efforts will be made to ensure that data is anonymized, and original sources are properly cited to maintain confidentiality and intellectual property rights (Shenton, 2004). Any specific ethical considerations from the original studies will be acknowledged and adhered to.
- **Integrity and Transparency:** Adherence to ethical standards will involve accurately representing the findings of secondary data, avoiding misinterpretation or misrepresentation of original research (Tripathy, 2013). This includes a transparent reporting of the data collection and analysis process and addressing potential conflicts of interest or biases in the secondary data.

3.7 Researcher's Positionality

As a researcher, my understanding and philosophy regarding early childhood development are deeply informed by my personal experiences and volunteer work. Growing up in Kigali, Rwanda, and supporting my younger brother Imena, who has Down syndrome, has significantly influenced my perspective on the challenges and opportunities faced by children with cognitive disabilities. These experiences fuel my dedication to investigating effective interventions that promote their development and social inclusion.

My approach to early childhood development is rooted in the belief that every child, regardless of developmental challenges, deserves an inclusive and supportive environment to thrive. I view early childhood development as a holistic process that encompasses not just academic skills but also social, emotional, and cognitive growth. My experiences with Imena and my volunteer work at Tubiteho have reinforced my belief in the critical role of social play in learning. Structured social play helps children develop essential skills such as communication, empathy, and problem-solving, which are vital for their social integration and overall development (Guralnick, 2010). This conviction directly aligns with my research aims to explore how social play can serve as a transformative tool for children with Down syndrome.

In my volunteer role, I have observed the importance of collaboration between educators, families, and other professionals. Effective collaboration is key to creating and implementing Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) that are tailored to each child's unique needs. This process involves setting specific, measurable goals and regularly reviewing and adjusting strategies based on the child's progress and feedback from all involved parties. Clear communication and a shared commitment to the child's development are crucial in this collaborative effort (Cuskelly & Hauser-Cram, 2018). Recognizing this collaboration's significance shapes my inquiry into how partnerships between educators and families can enhance social play interventions.

Furthermore, collaboration extends beyond the creation of IEPs to ongoing interactions between families and professionals. By working together, we can address developmental goals more effectively and adapt strategies based on continuous assessment and feedback. This collaborative approach not only enhances the educational experience but also fosters trust and mutual respect between families and professionals (Guralnick, 2017). This understanding underpins my research focus on exploring effective strategies for implementing social play interventions in inclusive settings.

Maintaining reflexivity is a critical aspect of my research process. I am committed to regularly reflecting on how my personal experiences and perspectives might influence my research. To address potential biases, I will actively seek feedback from peers, engage in discussions with diverse stakeholders, and stay informed about current research and best practices in early childhood development. This approach will help ensure that my work remains research-based, inclusive, and grounded in a comprehensive understanding of the needs of children with cognitive disabilities.

In essence, my positionality not only shapes my research focus but also reinforces my dedication to advancing knowledge that can lead to meaningful changes in practice. By addressing the gaps in the existing literature, particularly regarding the role of social play in promoting inclusion, I aspire to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how these interventions can enhance the lives of children like Imena.

In conclusion, Chapter 3 has outlined the research design and methodology employed to explore the impact of structured social play interventions on children with Down syndrome. By adopting a Constructivist paradigm and using a qualitative approach, this study seeks to deepen our understanding of how children actively engage with and benefit from social play in educational settings. The chapter detailed the use of secondary data analysis, participant selection criteria, and data collection methods, ensuring a comprehensive and rigorous approach to analyzing existing research.

Furthermore, the chapter addressed ethical considerations and highlighted the importance of reflexivity in the research process, given the researcher's personal connection to the topic. The combination of thematic and comparative analysis methods will allow for a robust synthesis of findings, offering new insights into the role of social play interventions. In the next chapter, the findings from the data analysis will be presented, offering a deeper exploration of the themes identified and their implications for the developmental outcomes of children with Down syndrome.

Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

4.1 Introduction to Findings

This chapter presents findings from a scoping review of secondary sources on the impact of structured social play on children with Down syndrome. The main research question guiding this chapter is: **How can structured social play interventions contribute to the social inclusion and development of children with Down syndrome?**

This chapter addresses three sub-questions:

1. What are the key components of social play that support development in children with Down syndrome?
2. How do peer-mediated play interventions foster social interactions?
3. What roles do Early Childhood (EC) educators and parents play in facilitating inclusive social play?

Based on the scoping review, these findings are organized into three core themes: (1) the emotional and social benefits of structured play, (2) the impact on social inclusion, and (3) challenges and barriers to collaborative, inclusive social play. The chapter also contextualizes these findings within Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), linking structured play's impact to environmental systems that support the developmental trajectory of children with Down syndrome. Recent studies on digital communication platforms, such as ClassDojo, further illuminate how collaborative ecosystems involving educators, families, and supportive policies can optimize these interventions (Chen & Rivera-Vernazza, 2022).

This section organizes findings into three thematic areas aligned with the research questions. These findings are analyzed within the framework of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), contextualizing the interactions between the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem in influencing developmental outcomes.

Theme 1: The Emotional and Social Benefits of Structured Play for Children with Down Syndrome

Structured social play provides significant opportunities for emotional growth in children with Down syndrome, particularly in developing self-regulation, empathy, and resilience. Activities such as turn-taking games, role-playing, and storytelling offer children safe, predictable environments that encourage the expression and management of emotions (Guralnick, 2006; Schneider et al., 2011). These findings align with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) microsystem, where direct interactions between children and caregivers or peers form the foundation for emotional development. Additionally, the interplay between the microsystem and mesosystem, such as collaboration between home and school, amplifies the impact of structured play. This section synthesizes key findings from empirical studies while highlighting critical implications for practice and policy.

Key Insights and Practical Examples

1. **Turn-Taking Activities**:

2. Interactive games like *Hot Potato* or *Duck Duck Goose* foster patience, cooperation, and delayed gratification. These activities provide a framework for managing impulses and engaging positively with peers in group settings (Roeden et al., 2011).

3. **Role-Playing Scenarios**:

Simulated everyday interactions, such as "a day at the park" or "shopping at the grocery store," allow children to explore emotional responses in low-pressure contexts. These scenarios enhance emotional regulation by helping children practice socially appropriate behaviors (Schneider et al., 2011; Wishart, 2001).

4. **Storytelling Circles**:

Weekly guided storytelling sessions promote self-expression and perspective-taking, fostering empathy and a sense of belonging. These sessions encourage children to articulate their thoughts while listening to others' experiences, deepening their emotional understanding (Barrett & Barber, 2007).

These structured activities illustrate the influence of Bronfenbrenner's **microsystem**, where immediate, supportive interactions shape emotional outcomes. Furthermore, they demonstrate how the **mesosystem**, such as coordinated efforts between educators and parents, can reinforce these skills across home and school environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

These practical examples are supported by a robust body of empirical evidence, as detailed in the following summary of key studies.

Table 4.1

Summary of Key Studies Demonstrating the Emotional Benefits of Structured Play for Children with Down Syndrome

Study	Key Findings	Methodology
Guralnick (2006)	Structured play enhances emotional regulation.	Case Studies
Schneider et al. (2011)	Peer-mediated play fosters emotional expressiveness.	Observations
Wishart (2001)	Play addresses unique emotional challenges in Down syndrome.	Literature Review
Chen and Rivera-Vernazza (2022)	Digital platforms bridge emotional learning between home and school.	Mixed Methods
Fidler et al. (2005)	Group play builds resilience and a sense of belonging.	Observations
Roeden et al. (2011)	Structured play improves patience and emotional understanding.	Observations
Freeman and Kasari (2002)	Peer-based interventions encourage emotional growth.	Observations
Hughes et al. (1997)	Scaffolding supports emotional regulation development.	Case Studies
Vaughn et al. (2001)	Cooperative games enhance empathy and self-regulation.	Observations
Barrett and Barber (2007)	Narrative play fosters emotional complexity.	Case Studies

Note: Data in this table are synthesized from studies by Guralnick (2006), Schneider et al. (2011), Wishart (2001), Chen and Rivera-Vernazza (2022), Fidler et al. (2005), Roeden et al.

(2011), Freeman and Kasari (2002), Hughes et al. (1997), Vaughn et al. (2001), and Barrett and Barber (2007).

These studies collectively demonstrate the emotional benefits of structured play, while also revealing gaps and challenges that merit further exploration.

Critical Analysis

The evidence emphasizes structured play's transformative potential in fostering emotional development for children with Down syndrome. Across studies, consistent and predictable play environments were shown to enhance emotional security, self-expression, and resilience (Guralnick, 2006; Roeden et al., 2011). Additionally, peer-mediated play interventions were particularly effective in cultivating empathy and social connectedness (Schneider et al., 2011; Freeman & Kasari, 2002).

However, critical gaps persist in the literature:

- **Short-Term Focus**: Many studies, such as Schneider et al. (2011), examine immediate outcomes of structured play, with limited insights into long-term emotional impacts.
- **Accessibility of Digital Tools**: While Chen and Rivera-Vernazza (2022) highlight the promise of platforms like ClassDojo, access to such tools remains a barrier in low-resource settings.
- **Cultural Contexts**: The predominance of studies conducted in Western settings (e.g., Guralnick, 2006; Schneider et al., 2011) leaves questions about the cultural adaptability of structured play interventions unanswered.

Future research should prioritize longitudinal studies to capture sustained emotional outcomes and explore culturally adaptive frameworks to extend the benefits of structured play across diverse contexts.

Practical Implications Within Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Framework

1. **Microsystem**:

Structured play activities directly benefit children through immediate interactions with peers, educators, and caregivers, fostering emotional regulation and self-expression (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

2. **Mesosystem**:

Collaboration between educators and families enhances consistency in emotional learning. Digital platforms like ClassDojo can serve as bridges between home and school, enabling caregivers to reinforce classroom-based strategies (Chen & Rivera-Vernazza, 2022).

3. **Exosystem**:

Institutional policies, such as funding for digital tools and professional development, can support educators in delivering emotionally enriching play-based activities (Fidler et al., 2005).

4. **Macrosystem**:

Broader societal values around inclusion shape the prioritization of emotional development programs. Advocacy for universal access to digital tools is essential to ensure equitable opportunities for structured play (Chen & Rivera-Vernazza, 2022; Schneider et al., 2011).

By situating the findings within Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, these practical implications underscore the layered and systemic nature of structured play's impact.

Structured social play is a powerful intervention for fostering emotional development in children with Down syndrome. The evidence highlights its role in enhancing self-regulation, empathy, and resilience, while also emphasizing the importance of collaboration and cultural adaptability. Addressing the identified research gaps, particularly through longitudinal and cross-cultural studies, will be critical in maximizing the potential of these interventions and informing inclusive education policies.

Theme 2: Impact of Structured Play on Social Inclusion

While structured play significantly enhances emotional development, its role in fostering social inclusion is equally critical. Social inclusion enables children with Down syndrome to actively participate in shared experiences, build meaningful peer relationships, and develop a sense of belonging. Structured play creates opportunities for interaction, collaboration, and empathy, reducing social isolation and challenging stigmas (Kasari et al., 2012; Buckley et al., 2006). These interventions align with Bronfenbrenner's **mesosystem**, which emphasizes the importance of interactions between families, schools, and communities in creating inclusive environments.

This section synthesizes empirical evidence on how structured play fosters social inclusion, highlighting practical examples and key findings from the literature.

Key Insights and Practical Examples

1. **Buddy Systems**:

Pairing children with Down syndrome and typically developing peers for joint activities, such as reading or art projects, promotes sustained peer relationships and mutual understanding (Kasari et al., 2012).

2. **Team-Based Games**:

Activities like scavenger hunts or relay races encourage collaboration, problem-solving, and shared achievements, fostering peer acceptance (De Rosnay & Hughes, 2006).

3. **Inclusive Story Circles**:

Facilitating group storytelling sessions where every child contributes promotes a sense of belonging and reduces social hierarchies (Dyson, 2001).

These structured activities emphasize the interplay of the microsystem (peer interactions) and mesosystem (collaborative efforts between educators and families) in creating environments that foster social inclusion.

These practical examples are supported by a strong evidence base, as summarized in the following table.

Table 4.2

Summary of Studies Demonstrating Social Inclusion Through Structured Play

Study	**Key Findings**	**Methodology**
Kasari et al. (2012)	Peer-mediated activities promote inclusion.	Observations
Buckley et al. (2006)	Group play enhances peer relationships.	Observations

Chen and Rivera-Vernazza (2022)	Digital tools support collaboration for inclusion.	Mixed Methods
Jordan et al. (1998)	Inclusive play reduces stigma and fosters empathy.	Observations
Guralnick and Groom (1988)	Group play improves social competence.	Observations
Dyson (2001)	Storytelling builds empathy and social connections.	Observations
Booth and Ainscow (2011)	Collaborative efforts promote inclusive practices.	Literature Review
Hestenes and Carroll (2000)	Peer-mediated play improves teamwork and collaboration.	Observations
Vaughn et al. (2002)	Integrated play groups reduce isolation.	Observations
De Rosnay and Hughes (2006)	Cooperative activities encourage peer acceptance.	Observations

Note: Data synthesized by the author from studies cited above, following APA 7th edition guidelines for table notes (Kasari et al., 2012; Buckley et al., 2006; Chen & Rivera-Vernazza, 2022; Jordan et al., 1998; Guralnick & Groom, 1988; Dyson, 2001; Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Hestenes & Carroll, 2000; Vaughn et al., 2002; De Rosnay & Hughes, 2006).

These studies collectively highlight structured play's role in reducing social isolation and building inclusive peer relationships. However, they also reveal gaps in long-term sustainability and cultural adaptability.

Critical Analysis

The findings emphasize that structured play interventions, particularly peer-mediated activities, are effective in fostering social inclusion for children with Down syndrome (Kasari et al., 2012; Vaughn et al., 2002). These activities not only enhance peer relationships but also challenge negative perceptions and reduce stigma (Jordan et al., 1998). Storytelling and collaborative games are particularly effective in promoting empathy and mutual respect (Dyson, 2001; De Rosnay & Hughes, 2006).

However, the following limitations warrant further investigation:

- **Sustainability of Inclusion**: While many studies (e.g., Kasari et al., 2012; Buckley et al., 2006) demonstrate short-term benefits, the evolution of peer relationships as children grow older remains underexplored. For example, Jordan et al. (1998) focus on stigma reduction in early childhood but do not examine whether these effects persist in adolescence.
- **Cultural Contexts**: Most studies are conducted in Western settings, leaving questions about how structured play interventions translate across diverse cultural environments (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Chen & Rivera-Vernazza, 2022).
- **Access to Resources**: Chen and Rivera-Vernazza (2022) highlight the potential of digital tools in promoting collaboration, but access to such resources remains unequal, particularly in low-resource settings.

Future research should prioritize longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact of structured play on social inclusion. Additionally, culturally adaptive frameworks should be developed to ensure these interventions are accessible and effective across diverse communities.

Practical Implications Within Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Framework

1. **Microsystem**:

Structured play enhances direct peer interactions, fostering friendships and reducing social isolation. Activities such as buddy systems and team-based games provide scaffolding for social competence (Kasari et al., 2012).

2. **Mesosystem**:

Collaboration between families, educators, and communities is crucial for sustaining inclusive practices. For example, joint parent-teacher workshops can emphasize the importance of structured play in promoting inclusion (Buckley et al., 2006; Booth & Ainscow, 2011).

3. **Exosystem**:

Institutional policies should prioritize funding for structured play interventions and professional development for educators. Resources such as digital collaboration tools (e.g., ClassDojo) can bridge gaps between home and school (Chen & Rivera-Vernazza, 2022).

4. **Macrosystem**:

Societal attitudes and policies around inclusion influence the prioritization of structured play interventions. Advocacy for equitable access to these interventions, particularly in underrepresented regions, is essential (Jordan et al., 1998; Booth & Ainscow, 2011).

By situating structured play within Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems, these practical implications highlight the interconnected factors that enable sustainable social inclusion.

Structured play is a powerful tool for fostering social inclusion among children with Down syndrome. The evidence demonstrates its ability to enhance peer relationships, reduce stigma, and promote a sense of belonging. However, addressing gaps in sustainability and cultural adaptability will be critical to maximizing its long-term impact. Inclusive practices supported by policy, collaboration, and advocacy can ensure these interventions benefit children across diverse contexts.

Theme 3: Challenges and Barriers to Collaborative, Inclusive Social Play

Despite its documented benefits, the implementation of structured social play faces significant challenges. Barriers such as resource limitations, societal stigma, and inconsistent Individualized Education Plan (IEP) implementation often hinder the effectiveness of these interventions. These challenges are exacerbated by systemic inequities, cultural misunderstandings, and a lack of cohesive policies (Stoneman, 2001; Chambers et al., 2004). Addressing these barriers requires collaborative, multi-level efforts to create inclusive and equitable environments for children with Down syndrome.

This section synthesizes evidence on barriers to structured play, highlights practical strategies for overcoming these obstacles, and contextualizes findings within Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory.

Key Insights and Practical Examples

1. **Inclusive Play Spaces**:

2. Accessible playgrounds equipped with sensory-friendly features, such as quiet zones or tactile paths, promote participation for children with diverse needs (Hanson & Carta, 1995). However, funding limitations often restrict their availability.

3. **Training Workshops**:

Professional development for educators on inclusive strategies enhances their ability to facilitate structured play. For example, workshops on peer-mediated interventions can address social competence deficits in children with Down syndrome (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000).

4. **Parent-Educator Collaboration**:

Digital tools like ClassDojo enable alignment of play-based strategies between home and school, fostering consistency and reducing disruptions caused by inconsistent IEP implementation (Chen & Rivera-Vernazza, 2022).

These examples highlight how targeted interventions can address specific barriers, but systemic challenges remain.

The following table summarizes key studies on barriers to structured play, illustrating the complex and multi-dimensional nature of these challenges.

Table 4.3

Summary of Studies Identifying Barriers to Structured Play

Study	Key Findings	Methodology
Stoneman (2001)	Stigma and exclusion limit participation.	Literature Review
Bauminger & Kasari (2000)	Social competence deficits hinder engagement.	Observations

Hanson & Carta (1995)	Resource disparities restrict access to inclusive play spaces.	Interviews
Chambers et al. (2004)	Funding and training gaps hinder inclusion.	Mixed Methods
McGregor et al. (2015)	Inconsistent IEP implementation disrupts interventions.	Case Studies
Chen & Rivera-Vernazza (2022)	Digital inequities exacerbate disparities.	Mixed Methods
Hall et al. (2005)	Cultural and linguistic barriers hinder collaboration.	Qualitative Interviews
Downs & Strand (2008)	Societal stigma perpetuates exclusion and discrimination.	Literature Review
Odom et al. (1999)	Peer-mediated interventions lack sustainability.	Observations
MacIntyre (2017)	Insufficient policies fail to support inclusive play.	Literature Review

Note: Data synthesized by the author from studies cited above, following APA 7th edition guidelines (Stoneman, 2001; Chambers et al., 2004; Chen & Rivera-Vernazza, 2022; Hall et al., 2005; Hanson & Carta, 1995).

These findings provide valuable insights into the challenges of implementing structured play, while also highlighting gaps and opportunities for improvement.

Critical Analysis

The reviewed studies reveal several recurring themes in the barriers to structured play:

1. **Systemic Inequities**:

Resource disparities, such as the lack of funding for accessible play spaces and educator training, are significant obstacles (Hanson & Carta, 1995; Chambers et al., 2004). These inequities are particularly pronounced in under-resourced communities, limiting access to inclusive opportunities.

2. **Societal Stigma and Misunderstandings**:

Negative societal attitudes toward disability perpetuate exclusion, as noted by Stoneman (2001) and Downs and Strand (2008). Stigma not only affects peer acceptance but also influences the willingness of schools and communities to invest in inclusive play.

3. **Inconsistent IEP Implementation**:

McGregor et al. (2015) emphasize the challenges posed by variability in IEP quality and execution, which can disrupt structured play interventions. This inconsistency is compounded by a lack of collaboration between parents and educators.

4. **Cultural and Linguistic Barriers**:

Hall et al. (2005) highlight how cultural differences and language barriers hinder effective communication between families and schools, reducing the efficacy of inclusive practices.

5. **Sustainability of Interventions**:

While peer-mediated approaches show promise, their long-term impact is often limited by inadequate support structures and training (Odom et al., 1999).

Practical Implications Within Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Framework

1. **Microsystem**:

Educators and peers play a critical role in fostering acceptance and reducing stigma. Training workshops on inclusive strategies can empower educators to address social competence deficits (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000).

2. **Mesosystem**:

Strengthening collaboration between families, schools, and communities is essential. Tools like ClassDojo can bridge communication gaps, aligning home and school strategies for structured play (Chen & Rivera-Vernazza, 2022).

3. **Exosystem**:

Institutional support is critical to overcoming resource disparities. Policies should prioritize funding for accessible play spaces and professional development for educators (Chambers et al., 2004; Hanson & Carta, 1995).

4. **Macrosystem**:

Societal attitudes toward disability inclusion must shift to prioritize structured play as a developmental right. Advocacy campaigns can challenge stigma and promote inclusive values at a broader societal level (Downs & Strand, 2008; MacIntyre, 2017).

By situating these barriers within Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, it is evident that overcoming these challenges requires coordinated efforts across all levels of influence.

Structured play offers immense potential for fostering inclusion and development in children with Down syndrome, but significant barriers impede its widespread implementation. Addressing resource disparities, societal stigma, and systemic inequities will require targeted policies, professional development, and collaborative frameworks. By prioritizing these solutions, we can move closer to creating equitable environments where all children can thrive.

4.2 Thematic Analysis and Implications

This section synthesizes the findings from the scoping review, highlighting the developmental outcomes of structured social play for children with Down syndrome and identifying practical implications for interventions. The analysis integrates insights from emotional development, social inclusion, and barriers to implementation, offering a comprehensive perspective on the benefits and challenges of structured play.

Emotional Development

Structured play provides consistent and supportive environments that help children with Down syndrome develop essential emotional skills, such as managing frustration, expressing empathy, and interpreting non-verbal cues (Schneider et al., 2011). Digital platforms, such as ClassDojo, enhance this process by enabling real-time collaboration between educators and parents, ensuring that emotional growth strategies are reinforced across settings (Chen & Rivera-Vernazza, 2022). These interventions reduce emotional outbursts and foster self-regulation, which are foundational for broader social and emotional development.

Social Inclusion

Peer-mediated activities, such as team-based games and buddy systems, promote positive peer relationships and reduce social isolation (Kasari et al., 2012). By creating opportunities for shared experiences, structured play fosters an inclusive culture that benefits all participants. Digital tools bridge the mesosystem by enabling parents and educators to collaborate on strategies that extend social inclusion beyond the classroom, increasing children's confidence and sense of belonging.

Barriers to Implementation

Despite its benefits, structured play faces barriers such as resource disparities, societal stigma, and inconsistent implementation of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). Limited access to inclusive play spaces and unequal availability of digital tools exacerbate these challenges (Chambers et al., 2004; Chen & Rivera-Vernazza, 2022). Overcoming these barriers requires systemic efforts to provide equitable access to resources, inclusive training for educators, and supportive policies.

4.3 Connecting Findings to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the multi-level factors influencing the effectiveness of structured social play. The findings from this study highlight the critical role of interconnected systems in supporting the developmental trajectory of children with Down syndrome.

- **Microsystem**: Direct interactions between children, parents, and educators during structured play form the foundation for emotional and social development. Activities such as storytelling and team-based games create opportunities for peer bonding and emotional expression. Digital platforms, such as ClassDojo, further strengthen the microsystem by facilitating communication and collaboration (Chen & Rivera-Vernazza, 2022).

- **Mesosystem**: Collaboration between families, schools, and communities enhances the consistency and effectiveness of structured play interventions. For example, coordinated efforts between parents and teachers ensure that social skills learned in the classroom are reinforced at home (Kasari et al., 2012).
- **Exosystem**: Access to resources, such as inclusive play spaces, educator training, and digital tools, shapes the availability and quality of structured play interventions. Policies that prioritize funding for these resources can significantly reduce barriers (Chambers et al., 2004; Hanson & Carta, 1995).
- **Macrosystem**: Societal values and attitudes toward disability and inclusion influence the prioritization of structured play in educational and community settings. Advocacy efforts to challenge stigma and promote inclusive policies can create a more supportive environment for these interventions (Stoneman, 2001; Downs & Strand, 2008).
- **Chronosystem**: Consistent involvement in structured play over time reinforces emotional resilience and social skills. Digital tools that track developmental milestones can help educators and families ensure sustained progress (Chen & Rivera-Vernazza, 2022).

This theoretical framework underscores the need for coordinated efforts across systems to maximize the benefits of structured social play.

4.4 Addressing Research Gaps

The scoping review highlights several gaps in the current research on structured social play, offering directions for future investigation:

1. **Longitudinal Studies**:

While short-term benefits of structured play are well-documented, there is limited research on its long-term impact. Longitudinal studies are needed to explore how structured play contributes to sustained emotional resilience and social inclusion as children with Down syndrome grow older (Schneider et al., 2011; Kasari et al., 2012).

2. **Culturally Inclusive Research**:

Most existing studies focus on Western contexts, leaving a gap in understanding how structured play interventions can be adapted for diverse cultural settings. Future research should prioritize culturally responsive approaches to ensure global applicability (Booth & Ainscow, 2011).

3. **Digital Equity and Collaboration**:

Unequal access to digital tools limits the ability of underserved communities to fully participate in structured play interventions. Further research should explore how to bridge technological disparities and optimize educator-family collaboration using affordable, accessible digital platforms (Chen & Rivera-Vernazza, 2022).

By addressing these gaps, future research can enhance the inclusivity and effectiveness of structured play interventions, ensuring that they meet the needs of all children with Down syndrome.

4.5 Conclusion

Structured social play is a transformative intervention for promoting emotional resilience, social inclusion, and overall development in children with Down syndrome. The findings from this study demonstrate that structured play fosters critical skills, such as self-regulation and empathy, while reducing social isolation and challenging societal stigma. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory contextualizes these benefits within a cohesive framework, emphasizing the importance of collaboration across families, educators, and communities.

However, persistent challenges, including resource disparities, societal stigma, and technological inequities, limit the potential of structured play. Addressing these barriers through targeted policies, inclusive practices, and equitable access to resources will be essential to maximizing its impact. Future research should focus on long-term outcomes, cultural adaptation, and digital equity to extend the benefits of structured play to all children with Down syndrome.

Through sustained collaboration and systemic support, structured social play can become a cornerstone of inclusive education, empowering children with Down syndrome to thrive in all aspects of their lives.

The next chapter will discuss how these findings answer the research questions, contribute to existing literature, and offer practical insights for educators, parents, and policymakers in fostering inclusive environments for children with Down syndrome.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Discussion of Key Findings

1. Components of Social Play

Structured play activities like turn-taking games, storytelling, and role-playing consistently demonstrate their effectiveness in fostering social and emotional skills among children with Down syndrome. Guralnick (2006) emphasizes that predictable routines, such as turn-taking, enable children to develop self-regulation by creating opportunities to manage impulses and respond to peers. Schneider et al. (2011), meanwhile, highlight role-playing as a critical activity that fosters empathy and advanced problem-solving skills. While both studies agree on the importance of structure, Schneider's analysis suggests that cultural and contextual adaptability is equally important. For instance, they found that children's engagement increased when role-play scenarios reflected familiar cultural themes, a nuance not addressed by Guralnick. Furthermore, while Guralnick stresses the role of predictability in reducing anxiety, Schneider argues that introducing moderate variability within structured activities can challenge children's cognitive flexibility. These findings suggest a synergistic model in which structured play activities combine consistency with cultural and contextual relevance, thereby optimizing their developmental impact. As Schneider observe, "structure is the foundation, but adaptability gives it life" (p. 342).

2. Structured Interventions

Peer-mediated play interventions emerged as a cornerstone for fostering social inclusion in children with Down syndrome. Kasari et al. (2012) illustrate how structured peer scaffolding creates immediate opportunities for inclusive interactions by equipping peers with strategies to support their counterparts. Buckley et al. (2006), in contrast, focus on the longitudinal outcomes of such interventions, noting significant improvements in academic engagement and emotional resilience when children are consistently exposed to inclusive play environments. Kasari highlight that “inclusive opportunities must be intentional and guided” (p. 78), aligning with Buckley et al.’s assertion that sustained engagement is essential. However, while Buckley underscores the importance of consistent exposure, Kasari’s research emphasizes the necessity of dynamic, adaptive interactions to maintain engagement. These complementary perspectives reveal that peer-mediated interventions are most effective when they balance short-term inclusivity with long-term developmental goals. Together, these findings advocate for designing programs that are simultaneously immediate in their impact and sustainable in their application, thus bridging the gap between temporary progress and lasting inclusion.

3. Roles of Educators and Parents

The interplay between educators and parents in facilitating social play is a recurring theme in the literature. Chen and Rivera-Vernazza (2022) argue that educators are pivotal in modeling social behaviors during structured activities, while parents extend these practices into daily routines, ensuring continuity and reinforcement. Guralnick (2006) similarly emphasizes the educator’s role but attributes greater weight to classroom-based interventions as the primary site of development. This divergence highlights an essential tension: while educators may be better equipped to introduce structured social play, parental involvement ensures these skills are practiced consistently. Chen and Rivera-Vernazza also explore barriers to collaboration, such as disparities in parental engagement due to socioeconomic factors, which educators often overlook. They note that successful interventions depend on bridging these gaps through regular communication and shared planning. Both studies agree that alignment between home and school environments amplifies the impact of social play, but Chen and Rivera-Vernazza stress that true collaboration requires addressing systemic inequities that limit parental participation. This analysis underscores the importance of a cohesive, equitable partnership between educators and parents, as Chen and Rivera-Vernazza conclude: “Collaboration is not optional; it is the foundation of effective intervention” (p. 15)These findings support the potential of structured social play as an intervention to enhance emotional resilience and social inclusion among children with Down syndrome, particularly when there is a strong partnership between educators and parents.

5.2 Interpretation of Findings in Relation to Theoretical Framework

Using Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory as a guiding framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), this study highlights how various environmental layers contribute to or challenge structured social play interventions for children with Down syndrome.

1. **Microsystem (Immediate Environment)**: The interactions between educators, parents, and children were significant in building social and emotional skills. Educators modeled positive behaviors through structured play, while parents extended these lessons at home, creating a consistent environment across settings. Digital communication platforms, like ClassDojo, further strengthened the microsystem by enabling ongoing interaction between school and family, reinforcing structured play’s benefits beyond the classroom (Chen & Rivera-Vernazza, 2022).
    a. *Comparison with Literature*: Previous studies emphasize the need for consistency between home and school in fostering social skills in children with developmental challenges (Guralnick, 2006). This study builds on that finding by

demonstrating how digital tools can reinforce continuity, thus enhancing the microsystem's influence on emotional and social development.

2. **Mesosystem (Interconnections)**: Collaboration between home and school environments forms a crucial part of the mesosystem. Digital tools facilitate this connection, allowing educators and parents to align on social goals, monitor progress, and reinforce skills across settings. This alignment helps children with Down syndrome apply social skills in various environments, enhancing generalization of social behavior (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Guralnick, 2006).

    a. *Novel Contribution*: By linking digital communication to the mesosystem, this study highlights how technology fosters a stronger home-school connection, an aspect often overlooked in prior studies.

3. **Exosystem (External Influences)**: Institutional factors, such as school policies, funding for inclusive resources, and access to digital tools, shape the opportunities available for structured play. Schools that prioritize inclusive education and support digital access contribute to an adaptive exosystem that promotes developmental outcomes (Chen & Rivera-Vernazza, 2022).

    a. *Comparison with Literature*: Existing research emphasizes the role of inclusive policies in creating supportive learning environments (McGregor et al., 2015). This study extends that understanding by showing how policy changes, like increased funding for digital resources, can enhance both access to and effectiveness of social play interventions.

4. **Macrosystem (Cultural and Societal Values)**: Cultural attitudes toward inclusivity and support for children with Down syndrome influence the acceptance and

accessibility of structured play opportunities. Societies that value digital equity and inclusive practices foster a more supportive environment for these children (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

a. *Implications for Change*: Shifting societal attitudes can increase acceptance and encourage more inclusive practices, benefiting not only children with Down syndrome but also typically developing peers who gain empathy and understanding through inclusive play.

b.

5. **Chronosystem (Temporal Changes)**: The study underscores that long-term engagement in structured play, supported by consistent family and educator collaboration, can foster lasting improvements in social and emotional resilience. Digital tools that track and reinforce developmental milestones contribute to sustained growth, allowing for adjustments in strategies over time as the child develops (Chen & Rivera-Vernazza, 2022).

These findings highlight the interconnected nature of environmental influences on children's development and the value of Bronfenbrenner's theory in maximizing the impact of structured social play.

5.3 Practical Implications

The insights gained from this study provide actionable recommendations for educators, parents, and policymakers to support inclusive social play for children with Down syndrome.

- **For Educators**: EC educators can implement structured activities that foster social skills, such as cooperative games and role-play exercises. Modeling behaviors and guiding interactions allows children to practice social skills that build emotional resilience. Educators should also use digital platforms to communicate with parents, share progress, and suggest ways to reinforce these skills at home (Guralnick, 2006; Chen & Rivera-Vernazza, 2022).

- *Actionable Steps*: Educators could initiate weekly updates via ClassDojo or similar platforms, provide individualized feedback on social progress, and suggest home-based activities to complement classroom learning.

- **For Parents**: Parents play a vital role in reinforcing social skills learned at school. By incorporating structured play activities at home, such as family games involving turn-taking, parents can build their child's confidence and social understanding. Digital platforms allow parents to stay informed and aligned with educators' strategies, creating continuity between home and school (Schneider et al., 2011).

- *Real-World Example*: A parent might observe a video shared by a teacher showing their child practicing sharing in a group activity, then recreate similar play scenarios at home to strengthen the behavior.

- **For Policymakers**: Policies that support digital accessibility, inclusive play spaces, and training for educators in adaptive practices can help reduce barriers to structured social play. Increased funding for these resources can support the social and emotional development of children with Down syndrome in both home and educational environments (McGregor et al., 2015).

- *Illustrative Policy Impact*: Implementing grants for digital tools in underserved schools would allow families with limited access to participate fully in home-school communication, reinforcing social play interventions for a broader range of students.

5.4 Addressing Challenges and Recommendations for Improvement

Several challenges were identified in implementing structured social play, including limited access to inclusive resources, societal stigma, and unequal access to digital tools (Chen & Rivera-Vernazza, 2022; McGregor et al., 2015). Addressing these requires a comprehensive approach:

1. **Funding for Inclusive Resources**: Schools need financial support to create accessible play spaces, provide adaptive materials, and offer professional development on inclusive practices. This investment will enhance the accessibility and effectiveness of structured social play.
2. **Promoting Digital Accessibility**: Ensuring that all families have access to digital platforms is essential for reinforcing structured play interventions. Collaborating with policymakers to increase digital equity, especially in low-resource areas, can address disparities that restrict some families from fully engaging in their child's social development (Chen & Rivera-Vernazza, 2022).
3. **Raising Awareness and Reducing Stigma**: Advocacy and awareness campaigns can help reduce social stigma surrounding Down syndrome and promote the benefits of inclusive play. Schools and community organizations can organize awareness events to foster a culture of acceptance, supporting social inclusion (Kasari et al., 2012).
4. **Professional Development for Educators**: Training in inclusive practices and digital communication can help educators implement structured play more effectively. Workshops on adaptive techniques, cultural competence, and digital communication can empower educators to meet the diverse needs of children with Down syndrome (Guralnick, 2006).

5.5 Recommendations for Future Research

This study reveals important areas for future research to address gaps and build on current findings:

1. **Longitudinal Studies**: Research should explore the long-term impact of structured social play on emotional and social outcomes. Longitudinal studies can provide insights into how these interventions influence social inclusion and emotional resilience over time (Schneider et al., 2011).
2. **Culturally Inclusive Research**: Given that most research focuses on Western contexts, future studies should examine how structured play interventions are perceived and adapted in diverse cultural settings, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of inclusive play (McGregor et al., 2015).
3. **Effectiveness of Digital Collaboration Tools**: Further research is needed to evaluate how digital platforms optimize educator-parent collaboration. Studies should investigate the effectiveness of these tools in reinforcing social skills and assess how accessibility limitations impact their usage (Chen & Rivera-Vernazza, 2022).
4. **Impact of Family Involvement**: Research on the relationship between family involvement in structured play and children's social outcomes could offer deeper insights into parental support's role. Studies could examine specific family-based interventions and their effectiveness in reinforcing social skills.

5.6 Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations that may influence the interpretation of findings:

- **Reliance on Secondary Data**: Using secondary sources and a scoping review limited the ability to gather firsthand insights from children, educators, or parents directly involved in structured play. Primary research through direct observations or interviews would provide a more comprehensive perspective (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005).
- **Generalizability**: The findings may have limited generalizability across cultural contexts, as most studies in the scoping review focused on Western settings. Expanding the sample to include culturally diverse groups could enhance applicability (Guralnick, 2006).
- **Digital Access Variability**: Unequal access to digital platforms may have affected the findings on digital communication's effectiveness. Future studies including data from varied socioeconomic backgrounds would help clarify how digital access disparities influence structured play's impact (Chen & Rivera-Vernazza, 2022).

5.7 Conclusion

This study underscores the transformative potential of structured social play in supporting the holistic development of children with Down syndrome. Findings indicate that structured play interventions can enhance emotional resilience, foster social inclusion, and lay a foundation for lifelong social skills. By establishing collaborative partnerships between educators and parents, structured social play becomes a powerful tool for addressing the social and emotional needs of children with Down syndrome.

The recommendations outlined in this chapter aim to guide educators, families, and policymakers in creating inclusive environments that empower children with Down syndrome. By fostering supportive spaces where all children can thrive, this study envisions a future where inclusive play is a fundamental component of educational and developmental strategies, promoting growth, resilience, and belonging for every child.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and Future Directions

6.1 Restatement of Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of structured social play interventions in promoting the social inclusion and holistic development of children with Down syndrome. This research was guided by a primary question: *How can structured social play interventions contribute to the social inclusion and developmental growth of children with Down syndrome?* Additionally, threewere addressed:

1. What are the components of social play that support developmental growth in children with Down syndrome?
2. How do per-mediated play interventions foster social interactions?
3. What roles do Early Childhood (EC) educators and parents play in facilitating inclusive social play?

Through a scoping review of secondary sources, this study sought to uncover the potential of structured social play as a tool for supporting the social, emotional, and developmental needs of children with Down syndrome.

6.2 Summary of Key Findings

This study revealed three core findings:

1. **Structured Play as a Tool for Emotional Development**: Structured play activities like storytelling, turn-taking games, and role-playing help children with Down syndrome develop self-regulation, empathy, and social skills. These activities provide a safe

environment where children can learn and practice essential social behaviors, building their emotional resilience (Guralnick, 2006; Schneider et al., 2011).

2. **Social Inclusion through Peer-Mediated Play**: Peer-mediated interventions play a critical role in promoting social inclusion by fostering interactions between children with Down syndrome and their typically developing peers. These structured activities reduce social isolation, build a sense of belonging, and help establish positive peer relationships (Kasari et al., 2012; Buckley et al., 2006).

3. **Collaborative Roles of Educators and Parents**: Educators and parents have complementary roles in supporting structured social play. Educators model and scaffold social behaviors in the classroom, while parents reinforce these skills at home. Digital platforms like ClassDojo allow for real-time communication, creating a consistent support network that enhances developmental outcomes (Chen & Rivera-Vernazza, 2022).

These findings demonstrate that structured social play can serve as an effective intervention for enhancing the social and emotional well-being of children with Down syndrome, particularly when supported by a cohesive partnership between educators and families.

6.3 Contributions to the Field

This study makes both theoretical and practical contributions to the field of inclusive education and child development.

- **Theoretical Contributions**: By applying Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), this research provides a nuanced understanding of how structured play operates within different environmental layers. The study demonstrates the importance of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) in understanding how structured social play influences the development of children with Down syndrome. Within the microsystem, interactions between educators, parents, and children are critical, as educators facilitate play by modeling social behaviors while parents reinforce these practices at home, creating a consistent environment for emotional and social growth. The mesosystem, which bridges home and school, highlights the importance of collaboration; when parents and educators align through regular communication, structured play strategies are consistently implemented across settings. At the exosystem level, institutional policies and resources, such as funding for inclusive programs and educator training, significantly impact the accessibility and effectiveness of play interventions. Finally, the macrosystem shapes the broader cultural and societal attitudes that influence inclusivity; positive societal perceptions promote supportive practices, while stigma can hinder opportunities for meaningful interactions. These interconnected systems collectively emphasize that structured play's success relies on both immediate and broader environmental support (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Guralnick et al., 2011)

- **Practical Contributions**: This research offers actionable insights for educators, parents, and policymakers. For educators, it highlights strategies to implement structured play in classrooms, modeling positive social behaviors. For parents, it suggests ways to reinforce these skills at home, creating a consistent support system. For policymakers, the study emphasizes the need for policies that fund inclusive play spaces, support digital access, and provide training for educators in adaptive practices (Guralnick, 2006; McGregor et al., 2015).

6.4 Implications for Practice and Policy

The study's findings have important implications for educational practice and policy, offering strategies to improve the inclusivity and effectiveness of structured social play interventions.

- **Educational Practice**: Educators should be encouraged to incorporate structured social play into their curricula, as it provides valuable opportunities for children with Down syndrome to develop social skills in an inclusive environment. Specific strategies include using peer-mediated play and integrating structured play activities that foster emotional growth, such as cooperative games and role-playing scenarios (Kasari et al., 2012).
- **Policy Recommendations**: To promote access to structured social play interventions, policymakers should prioritize inclusive education by providing targeted funding for digital resources and professional development for educators. For example, initiatives such as grants or subsidies for tools like ClassDojo can "ensure that families, especially in underserved communities, remain actively engaged in their child's development while bridging the digital divide" (Chen & Rivera-Vernazza, 2022, p. 205). Additionally, programs like national "Inclusive Educator Development Programs" can offer "specialized training in facilitating inclusive play," equipping teachers with the necessary skills to support children with Down syndrome effectively (Chen & Rivera-Vernazza, 2022, p. 206). Collaboration between schools, community organizations, and healthcare providers, coupled with centralized digital platforms for sharing resources, can strengthen the impact of these interventions. Finally, implementing monitoring systems, such as a "National Inclusion Audit," would "ensure accountability and track progress in structured play implementation" (Chen & Rivera-Vernazza, 2022, p. 207). These efforts, supported by inclusive education

policies, can create equitable environments that empower children with disabilities to thrive socially and emotionally.

- **Digital Accessibility**: Given the critical role of digital platforms in fostering educator-parent collaboration, policymakers can bridge gaps in digital access by providing funding for devices and internet services, particularly in underserved areas. Establishing community tech hubs in schools or libraries can offer families access to devices and technical support, while mandating inclusive design standards ensures platforms like ClassDojo are accessible to all users, including those with disabilities or limited digital literacy. Monitoring and evaluation programs can track the effectiveness of these initiatives and adjust policies to meet emerging needs, ensuring families have the resources to support their child's social and and emotional development at home (Chen & Rivera-Vernazza, 2022).

6.5 Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged:

- **Reliance on Secondary Data**: The study was based on a scoping review of secondary sources, limiting the questioning of direct insights from participants, such as educators, parents, or children involved in structured play. Future research that includes primary data collection, such as interviews or observations, would provide a richer understanding of structured play's impact on children with Down syndrome (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005).
- **Cultural and Socioeconomic Contexts**: Most studies reviewed focused on Western settings, which may limit the generalizability of the findings across diverse cultural contexts. Further research is needed to explore how structured play interventions may vary across different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds (Guralnick, 2006).

- **Digital Access Variability**: Unequal access to digital platforms among families may influence the findings on the effectiveness of digital communication. Studies with a broader range of socioeconomic backgrounds would help clarify how digital access disparities affect structured play's impact (Chen & Rivera-Vernazza, 2022).

6.6 Directions for Future Research

Based on the findings and limitations of this study, several directions for future research are suggested:

1. **Longitudinal Studies**: Future research should examine the long-term effects of structured social play on the social and emotional outcomes of children with Down syndrome. Longitudinal studies can provide insights into whether the benefits of structured play are sustained over time, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of its impact (Schneider et al., 2011).
2. **Culturally Inclusive Studies**: To address the limitation of cultural generalizability, future research should explore how structured social play interventions are perceived and adapted across diverse cultural settings. This approach would expand our understanding of best practices in inclusive play within multicultural contexts (McGregor et al., 2015).
3. **Effectiveness of Digital Tools for Home-School Collaboration**: Further investigation into the effectiveness of digital platforms like ClassDojo in enhancing home-school collaboration is needed. Future studies could evaluate how these tools help reinforce social skills at home and identify any barriers families may face in accessing these resources (Chen & Rivera-Vernazza, 2022).

4. **Role of Family Involvement**: Research on the relationship between family involvement and social outcomes for children with Down syndrome would provide deeper insights into the role parents play in structured play. Studies could examine specific family-based interventions and assess their effectiveness in reinforcing social skills learned at school.

Such future research will contribute to a more inclusive society by refining strategies for structured social play, ensuring that all children, regardless of background or ability, can experience the benefits of a supportive, inclusive environment.

6.7 Final Conclusion and Vision

This study rests on the belief that true inclusion is more than simply accommodating diversity, it's about redefining our environments to better serve everyone involved. As George Dei eloquently states, "Inclusion is not bringing people into what already exists; it is making a new space, a better space for everyone (Dei, 2006).." This vision for inclusion is the foundation of this study, underscoring the transformative potential of structured social play as a tool for fostering the social, emotional, and developmental growth of children with Down syndrome. The findings highlight the importance of creating a supportive ecosystem that includes educators, parents, and policymakers, working together to provide inclusive and accessible play environments. Structured play interventions offer children with Down syndrome opportunities to build resilience, develop social connections, and cultivate lifelong skills that contribute to their overall well-being.

Reflecting on this research, I am reminded of my brother, Imena, who inspired me to explore the power of structured play. Growing up with Imena taught me the value of empathy, patience, and the importance of creating environments where every child feels included and supported. This thesis is dedicated not only to understanding the developmental needs of children like Imena but also to advocating for a future where they are fully embraced and supported by society.

Looking forward, I envision a world where structured social play is a standard component of inclusive education, where every child, regardless of their abilities, can thrive. By supporting inclusive practices, digital accessibility, and educator training, stakeholders can create environments where children with Down syndrome and all children can experience growth, connection, and a sense of belonging. This study calls for continued efforts in research, practice, and policy to support the holistic development of all children, fostering a culture of acceptance, empowerment, and hope for the future.

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Appendices

Research Ethics Exemption Clearance

2024-076 Exemption Clearance 2024-09-27

University Research Ethics Board (UREB)

RESEARCH ETHICS EXEMPTION CLEARANCE

REB Protocol #:	2024-076		
Effective Date	September 27, 2024	Expiry Date	September 26, 2025
Title of project:	Play Time with Imena:Exploring the importance of Social play for Children with Down Syndrome-Trisomy 21		
Researcher(s):	Lea D Umuhoza		
Supervisor (if applicable):	Mary Jane Harkins		
Co-Investigators:	n/a		
Version :	1		

The University Research Ethics Board (UREB) has conducted a limited review of the above-named study proposal and confirms that it respects the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* and Mount Saint Vincent University's policies, procedures, and guidelines regarding the ethics of research involving human participants. Upon review, the UREB concludes that this study does not meet the requirements for REB review and therefore found to be exempt from Research Ethics Clearance requirements under the following criteria:

☐	1. Description of proposed activities provided does not meet the criteria of research requiring research ethics review. TCPS Article 2.1
☐	2. Creative practice activities that do not obtain responses from participants that will be analyzed to answer a research question. TCPS Articles 2.2-2.6
☐	3. Testing within normal educational requirements, used exclusively for assessment, management or improvement purposes. TCPS Articles 2.2-2.6
☐	4. Human Cell Line Exemptions - De-identified. TCPS Article 12.21
☐	5. Human Cell Line Exemptions - Identified Cell Lines in Public Domain TCPS 12.22
☐	6. Observation of people in public places where it does not involve any intervention staged by the researcher, direct interaction with the individuals or groups; the individuals or groups being observed have no reasonable expectation of privacy; and dissemination of results will not identify specific individuals. TCPS Articles 2.2-2.6
☐	7. Program evaluation. TCPS Articles 2.2-2.6
☒	8. Research that relies exclusively on publicly available information, and the information is legally accessible to the publicand appropriately protected by law, or the information is publicly accessible and there is no reasonable expectation of privacy. TCPS Articles 2.2-2.6
☐	9. Quality assurance/quality improvement studies. TCPS Articles 2.2-2.6
☐	10. Research that relies exclusively on secondary use of anonymous information, or anonymous human biological materials, with no data linkage and will not generate identifiable information. TCPS Articles 2.2-2.6
☐	11. Other:

166 Bedford Hwy, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, B3M 2J6
T: 902-457-6350 | ethics@msvu.ca