

2020

Teachers' Perspectives on the Prepared Environment as a Component of the Toddler Curriculum

Maria Varela
Walden University

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Walden University

College of Education

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Maria Varela

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
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Walden University
2020

Abstract

Teachers' Perspectives on the Prepared Environment as a Component of the Toddler

Curriculum

by

Maria Varela

MA, Walden University, 2009

BS, University of Puerto Rico, 1993

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

November 2020

Abstract

There is insufficient research about teachers' perspectives on the prepared environment as a component of toddler program curriculum. Previous studies suggested the need to further investigate how teachers prepare toddler program environments to promote children's optimum development to meet their developmental milestones in group-based education. The conceptual framework for this study was grounded in Montessori's prepared environment and Malaguzzi's concept of environment as the third teacher. Twelve teachers with 3-19 years of experience in toddler education programs participated in semistructured interviews to answer three research questions about their perspectives on the prepared environment as a component of toddler program curriculum that promotes children's optimum growth and development, their perspectives on the environment as a third teacher that contributes to toddlers' developmental milestones, and their perspectives on resources they need to implement the prepared environment. Following the coding processes as outlined by Saldaña, data revealed that teachers are purposeful and thoughtful regarding the environment as part of the toddler program curriculum in the following ways: (a) enacting culturally sensitive and developmentally appropriate teaching philosophies, (b) preparing the environment as a third teacher, (c) observing and assessing children in the environment, (d) adapting environments to support all children in meeting developmental milestones, and (e) building relationships with children, families, and communities. Findings from this study will contribute to positive social change in toddler curriculum development and implementation as teachers prepare the environment as a third teacher. Professional learning will prepare staff and contribute to relationship-building among teachers, parents and communities. Social change will occur as toddlers' environments are continuously adapted to support all children in meeting their developmental milestones in group care and education.

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Dedication

I want to dedicate my work to all the toddlers in the world and especially to Maria Cristina Farinacci, a late toddlers' veteran teacher from Puerto Rico. She was the first toddler teacher whom I shared a classroom with, and she was the first toddler teacher with whom I experienced what it was like to be a toddler teacher in practice. She inspired the magic and passion for toddlers that I have today. Her legacy and mentorship were greater and more inspirational than she could ever know. It has been my responsibility to care, love, respect, and to learn more about how to facilitate these little humans' optimal development. More importantly, my goal is to open education stakeholders' eyes to the importance of this specific age in the early childhood community and to identify and facilitate educators' use of tools that will help children in the toddlerhood stage.

Acknowledgments

I would like to first give thanks to God. When I thought I was not going to be able to finish this journey, I always found the way and strength to keep going, and there is no doubt that the strength was from Him. I would like to thank my family and friends who patiently understood the limited quality time I was able to give them and always supported me during this lifelong goal. Last, I would like to recognize Walden University's excellence as an institution, the professors, my chairperson and mentor, Dr. Trube, and the doctoral committee for their patience and faith in me.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Planning curriculum and organizing the environment are part of every teacher's job to promote enriched learning experiences for young children, according to experts in the field of toddler education (Kuh, 2014; Hooper & Hallam, 2017). A very important part of toddler education is a prepared environment that supports the entire development of the child (Horn et al., 2018; Sunday, 2018). Several studies have confirmed the importance of a prepared environment as a component of a toddler curriculum (Dalli & White, 2016; Kennedy & Lees, 2015; La Paro & Gloeckler, 2016). However, researchers call for more studies related to the preparation of environments for toddlers so that toddlers meet their developmental milestones (Dalli & White, 2016; Gloeckler & La Paro, 2015; Hallam, Fouts, Bargreen, & Perkins., 2016; Hoffman & Kuvalanka, 2019; Hooper & Hallam, 2017; Kennedy & Lees, 2015; La Paro & Gloeckler, 2016; Loeb, 2016; Price, 2018; Swartz & Easterbrooks, 2014).

In this basic qualitative study, I conducted interviews to explore toddler teachers' perspectives on the prepared environment as a component of toddler program curriculum. The study can potentially contribute to positive social change by revealing teachers' perspectives about the importance of environments in toddler education. Findings from this exploration of teachers' perspectives have the potential to inform all early childhood professionals involved in toddler education about the importance of including prepared environments in the curriculum to support toddlers in reaching their developmental milestones.

Background

Researchers have suggested that there are environmental factors that support toddlers in reaching their optimum cognitive, social-emotional, and physical developmental milestones (Dalli & White, 2016; Gloeckler & La Paro, 2015; Swartz & Easterbrooks, 2014). However, there is insufficient research on toddler education in general (Dalli & White, 2016; Gloeckler & La Paro, 2015; Horm et al., 2018; Kennedy & Lees, 2015; Knauf, 2018; Swartz & Easterbrooks, 2014) and the prepared environment for toddlers, specifically (Chazan-Cohen et al., 2017). Although some studies provide data about the importance of environments as part of toddler curriculum, there is an absence of research on teachers' perspectives on the prepared environment as part of toddler program curriculum (Chazan-Cohen et al.; Dalli & White, 2016; Gloeckler & La Paro, 2015; Horm et al., 2018; Kennedy & Lees, 2015; Knauf, 2018; Swartz & Easterbrooks). In this study, I addressed the gap in research on toddler teachers' perspectives on the prepared environment as a component of a toddler program curriculum in group settings.

Problem Statement

The problem addressed in this basic qualitative study with interviews was insufficient research about teachers' perspectives on toddler education in general (Horm et al., 2018; Knauf, 2018) and important features of a toddler program curriculum related to how teachers prepare environments, specifically (Bussey & Hill, 2017). The insufficiency includes current research about the importance of an environment that is intentionally prepared for toddlers to reach their developmental milestones (Chazan-

Cohen et al., 2017) in group-based toddler care and education (Dalli & White, 2016; Kennedy & Lees, 2015; Uhlenberg, 2016). Researchers have called for more studies to investigate the prepared environment as a component of the toddler program curriculum (Bussey & Hill, 2017; Dalli & White, 2016; La Paro & Gloeckler, 2016). Further, researchers have stated that more studies are needed to identify the most important features of toddler curricula and connect them to how teachers prepare environments that reflect their knowledge, skills, and dispositions to promote optimum child development outcomes for all children (Bussey & Hill, 2017).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study with interviews was to explore toddler teachers' perspectives on the prepared environment as a component of the toddler program curriculum. The concept of a prepared environment originated with Maria Montessori (1949) and was further promoted by Loris Malaguzzi (1993) as environment as the third teacher. However, the importance of the environment has been understood by most early childhood program professionals who strive to meet young children's developing needs (Chazan-Cohen et al., 2017; Kuh & Rivard, 2014). According to Kuh and Rivard (2014), the prepared environment includes the following characteristics: a clean and well-designed room arrangement that facilitates activity and movement; age-appropriate materials and child-size furniture that are accessible to children; spaces that encourage exploration and manipulation of materials to promote intellectual development; space designs to encourage interactions with others that promote social development; and beautiful, orderly, and aesthetically pleasing surroundings. This study

addressed a gap in the research by focusing on the prepared environment as an important feature of the toddler curriculum (see Chazan-Cohen et al., 2017; Kuh & Rivard, 2014; Malaguzzi, 1993; Montessori, 1949).

Research Questions

The three research questions (RQs) were as follows:

RQ1: What are toddler teachers' perspectives on a prepared environment as a component of a toddler program curriculum that will promote optimum growth and development of toddlers?

RQ2: What are toddler teachers' perspectives on the concept of environment as a third teacher as a component of a toddler program curriculum that will promote optimum growth and development of toddlers?

RQ3: What are toddler teachers' perspectives on the types of resources and supports they need to implement a prepared environment as a component of toddler program curriculum?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was based on two concepts related to the preparation of toddler-education environments as part of a toddler program curriculum: Montessori's (1949) prepared environment and Malaguzzi's (1993) environment as the third teacher. These two concepts are based on both theorists' deep respect for and views of children as capable and competent beings, able to positively interact with their environments (Malaguzzi, 1993; Montessori, 1949). Both theorists asserted the

importance of the environment to promote independence, exploration, and socialization in order to encourage toddler learning.

According to Montessori, the prepared environment includes age-appropriate, clean, beautiful, stable, and routine-oriented spaces where children are allowed to develop as independent individuals. Maria Montessori (1949) asserted that during the first 6 years of a child's life, the child's mind is open to everything; therefore, exposure to an enriched environment that is prepared for optimal growth and development of each child is essential for the child's developing mind. In Montessori's framework, developmental stages during infancy and toddlerhood are known as sensitive periods, which need to take into consideration when preparing the environment. According to Montessori, sensitive periods are windows of discovery and opportunities when language, movement, and order are learned. Montessori suggested that educating children in a respectful environment will help them become aware of their sensitivities; she stated, "The first aim of the prepared environment is, as far as it is possible, to render the growing child independent of the adult" (Montessori, 1949, p. 6).

The concept of the environment as the third teacher proposed by Malaguzzi (1993) is a cornerstone of the Infant-Toddler School curriculum in Reggio Emilia, Italy. Toddler teachers of the Infant-A toddler programs in Reggio Emilia provide rich environments as resources for young children (Malaguzzi, 1987, 1993; Robson, 2017). As a concept, environment as a third teacher focuses on how children and adults create knowledge through teacher-child relationships and interactions within the environment to promote optimum development of young children (Robson, 2017). According to

Malaguzzi (1987), “What children learn does not follow as an automatic result from what is taught, rather, it is in large part due to the children’s own doing, as a consequence of their activities and our resources” (p. 17). Malaguzzi suggested teachers and children develop a symbiotic relationship with their environments. This child-environment relationship promotes children’s active participation in their learning by using their environments as a resource for learning (Robson, 2017).

Together the concepts of the prepared environment and environment as third teacher align and served to frame the problem statement, purpose, and significance of this study, as well as the questions and methodology. The conceptual framework aligns with the purpose of this research which was to determine teachers’ perspectives on the prepared environment as a component of a toddler program curriculum as set forth in the three RQs. The focus of the RQs was on discovering toddler teachers’ perspectives on the prepared environment (RQ1 and RQ2) as a curricular practice that will promote optimum growth and development of competent and capable toddlers, who can interact with their prepared environments and use resources and materials (RQ3) to construct their knowledge and skills, and as a result meet their developmental milestones.

Nature of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study with interviews was to explore teachers’ perspectives on the prepared environment as a component of a toddler program curriculum. Qualitative researchers generally focus on people’s opinions, ideas, and points of view about specific topics (Meyer, 2015). Qualitative studies are designed to focus on individuals or communities, and data are collected from methods such as

interviews, observation notes, and relevant documents (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2016; Meyer, 2015). I determined that following a basic qualitative study with interviews methodological paradigm supported my role as researcher. My intention for collecting data was to use individual, face-to-face semistructured interviews to explore teachers' perspectives from eight different toddler programs. I wanted to conduct semistructured interviews after work hours in a public place of the teachers' choosing such as the public library. However, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Walden University granted approval for researchers to conduct these interviews via e-mail or telephone calls. Therefore, a total of 12 toddler teachers in the Southwestern United States participated in the interviews with questions and prompts based on the conceptual framework and relevant literature in the field. As suggested by Malterud et al. (2016), following this approach resulted in the collection of rich data. I transcribed all interviews, which were conducted in English over the telephone. Data from interview transcripts were coded based on themes revealed by participants. According to Creswell (2013), coding allows a researcher to present data in a structure that reflects participants' answers to qualitative questions. I used a structured and descriptive coding protocol that included the participants' ideas, perspectives, and opinions about prepared environments for toddlers. I am resolute that a basic qualitative study with interviews was the most effective way to identify toddler teachers' perspectives.

Definitions

Environment as the third teacher: A concept present at Infant-Toddler Schools in Reggio Emilia, Italy; in a toddler programs that follow this philosophy, children are inspired to learn through exploration and play initiated by the teachers and children themselves (Biermier, 2015; Danko-McGhee & Slutsky, 2017; Edwards & Gandini, 2018). According to Malaguzzi (1993), the environment is an important tool that teachers need to use to promote learning and development.

Order and consistency: These are key attributes for a successful toddler environment according to Kovach and De Ros-Voseles (2015). Toddlers are developing an internal sense of order in all physical/intellectual domains. As such, it is necessary for teachers to maintain a consistent routine in an orderly environment to help toddlers develop a sense of internal order through activities that promote anticipation (Chazan-Cohen et al., 2017). Order is necessary for children to build a sense of security from their environments that will lead to healthy development as a whole individual and learning (Cassidy et al., 2017; Cross, 2018; Gopnik, 2017; Gonzalez-Mena & Eyer, 2001; La Paro & Gloeckler, 2016).

Prepared environment: Montessori's (1949) conception that the space that the teacher creates for children should be prepared to facilitate maximum child independence and promote children's exploration, optimum development, and learning. The prepared environment includes adequate learning material and inviting activities (Kovack & De Ros-Voseles, 2015).

Sensitive periods: These are windows of discovery and opportunities where each child demonstrates learning and development (Montessori, 1949). Teachers need to be observant and supportive of children's needs during these periods.

Toddler: A toddler is a child between the ages 14 and 36 months of age (Gopnik, 2017; Kovack & De Ros-Voseles, 2015). Most pediatricians and educators consider the toddler stage as beginning between the ages of 1 to 4 years old. The toddler is considered a child who is learning how to walk; the stage is a crucial developmental stage in all of the domains (Chazan-Cohen et al., 2017). According to Montessori (1949), the toddler is developing the sensitive developmental periods of language, sense of order, movement, and social skills. These sensitive periods begin at birth and end when the child is 3 years old (Montessori, 1949). For this study, toddlers were mobile children between the ages of 1 and 4 years.

Assumptions

In this study, I assumed that the 12 toddler teacher participants would provide genuine and truthful interview responses about their perspectives on the prepared environment and how it influences curriculum development for toddlers. I also assumed that the programs and/or schools where these teachers work would permit data collection and welcome the research process. I, as a researcher, relied on the honesty of the toddler teachers during the semistructured interviews. I further assumed that toddler-teachers would be most comfortable being interviewed by e-mail or phone based on the restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Walden University IRB approved interviews via e-mail or telephone calls.

Scope and Delimitations

The 12 participants of this basic qualitative study with interviews were toddler teachers who work in eight diverse toddler environments serving children ages 12 months through 36 months. Toddler-education programs are frequently established by professionals who follow different educational philosophies, curriculums, standards, and practices; however, each program creates an environment in which toddlers receive care and education (Corso, 2018; Kuh, 2014). This basic qualitative study with interviews addressed teachers' perspectives on the prepared environment as a component of a toddler program curriculum, its importance, and its relationship to each toddler's optimum development. Teachers of children younger than 12 months and older than 36 months and directors of toddler-education programs were excluded from the study.

Limitations

The data and results of this study were limited to 12 toddler teachers in eight different toddler environments. The findings of the study represent this small number of teachers and toddler environments only; participants' perspectives may not be generalizable to the entire field of toddler education. The findings do not represent the perspectives of toddler teachers across the United States on the prepared environment as part of toddler program curriculum. Limitations of the study also included diverse educational levels and professional development or training that participating toddler teachers have received. However, the study may potentially serve contribute to positive social change for the early childhood toddler community by creating a greater awareness about the importance of a prepared environment in toddler-education programs.

Significance

There are a few studies identifying the importance of prepared environments as part of a toddler program curriculum; however, researchers have called for additional investigations of environments for toddlers. Prominent early childhood programs consider the importance of the environment. For example, Montessori's theories and practices are followed in Montessori programs on a global scale (Conklin-Moore, 2017; Kuh & Rivard, 2014; Lillard & Jensen, 2018). Another example is found in the concept of environment as the third teacher proposed by Loris Malaguzzi (1987, 1993) and practiced in the Infant-Toddler Schools in Reggio Emilia, Italy (Biermeier, 2015) as well as in Reggio-inspired programs in the United States.

Findings from this study may contribute to addressing a gap in research about the importance of the prepared environment as a component of a toddler program curriculum. Findings could potentially enhance toddler teachers' knowledge about the environment as the third teacher. Researchers have identified that the environment is important for the optimum development of toddlers in meeting their developmental milestones (Corso, 2018). Findings from this study also have the potential to contribute to positive social change in toddler curriculum development and implementation. This knowledge may potentially influence decision-making by toddler program administrators, encouraging them to emphasize the prepared environment as a component of the toddler program curriculum and attend to resources needed by teachers to implement the prepared environment.

Summary

There is insufficient research in toddler education in general, and toddler educational environments in group care, specifically. The purpose of this study was to identify toddler teachers' perspectives on the prepared environment as a component of the toddler program curriculum. This study addressed a gap in the current research. I collected data for this basic qualitative study by conducting semistructured interviews with 12 toddler teachers from eight different toddler programs in the Southwestern United States. I had planned to conduct face-to-face interviews. However, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the IRB at Walden University gave approval to researchers to conduct interviews via e-mail or telephone calls. The first chapter of this study included key definitions, including of the prepared environment and its components. I described the purpose of the study; stated the RQs; and discussed the conceptual framework, nature, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance of the study. In Chapter 2, I will present a literature review and clarify the gap in the literature on research related to the importance of the toddler environment and how it may influence toddler learning and optimum development.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this basic qualitative study with interviews, I addressed the lack of knowledge about teachers' perspectives on the prepared environment as a component of the toddler program curriculum. Researchers have lamented the fact that there has been insufficient research on toddler education in general (Gloeckler & La Paro, 2015; Hallam et al., 2016; Hoffman & Kuvalanka, 2019; Hooper & Hallam, 2017; Horm et al. 2017; Knauf, 2018; Loeb, 2016; Price, 2018), which included limited knowledge about teachers' perspectives on the prepared environment as a component of toddler program curriculum (Dalli & White, 2016; Kennedy & Lees, 2015; Robson, 2017; Uhlenberg, 2016). They acknowledge that planning and organizing the environment and curriculum are part of every teacher's job to promote enriched learning experiences for young children (Corso, 2018; Kuh, 2014) and help toddlers meet their developmental milestones (Corso, 2018; Dalli & White, 2016; Horm et al., 2017).

In his seminal work, Dewey (1938, 1997) suggested that teachers view the environment as an instrument of agency that engages children and promotes their optimum development--physically, cognitively, socially, and emotionally--which was supported by Green, Kalvaitis and Worster (2016). Cassidy, King, Wang, Lower, and Kintner-Duffy (2017) also found that well-designed toddler environments promote autonomy, decision-making, and critical thinking in young children. Furthermore, Dalli and White (2016) found that a well-prepared environment supports toddlers' emotional development by promoting self-regulation and resiliency while meeting their developmental milestones. Researchers have advised that more studies are needed to

identify the most important features of toddler curriculum and how teachers prepare environments that promote optimum child development (Bussey & Hill, 2017; Cassidy et al., 2017; Gloeckler & La Paro, 2015; Loeb, 2016), especially related to group-based toddler care and education (Dalli & White, 2016; Kennedy & Lees, 2015; Uhlenberg, 2016). Although some studies provide data about the importance of environments as part of the toddler curriculum, little is known about teachers' perspectives on the prepared environment as part of the toddler program curriculum (Gloeckler & LaParo, 2015; Loeb, 2016). Gloeckler and LaParo (2015) found that toddlers' experiences in their learning environments are unexplored in the early childhood literature. Further research on toddlers' daily interactions within their environments is needed (Gloeckler & LaParo, 2015).

Researchers have also called for more studies of the professional learning opportunities toddler teachers need in order to make changes in their classrooms to achieve optimum curriculum that promotes learning environments for toddlers (Gloeckler & LaParo, 2015; Hallam et al., 2016; Kennedy & Lees, 2015; Loeb, 2016). Based on observations in high-quality rated toddler childcare programs, Hallam et al. (2016) identified causes for apprehension related to environmental factors that included low levels of teacher-child interactions and toddler teachers' lack of knowledge of child development. According to Hallam et al., toddler teachers need greater understanding of the importance of their everyday support for toddlers' growth and development and the importance of the environment. Furthermore, toddler education is sometimes overlooked by education stakeholders or decision makers, and teachers are given limited resources

when setting up their classroom's toddler environment (Hallam et al., 2016). Hoffman and Kuvalanka, (2019) and Swartz and Easterbrooks (2014) suggested that more attention and effort should be given to improve toddler education as very little attention has been dedicated to infants and toddlers, even though research indicates how important the first 6 years of life are. Every experience between the ages of birth to 6 years sets the personality of the human being (Hallam et al., 2016; Montessori, 1949; Sunday, 2018). Therefore, the purpose of this basic qualitative study with interviews was to explore teachers' perspectives on the prepared environment as a component of toddler program curriculum.

Literature Search Strategy

I searched for information about different toddler environments, early childhood philosophies, and toddler curriculum mainly using Walden University Library databases, such as Academic Search Complete, ERIC, Teacher Reference Center, and ProQuest Central databases. I also searched for literature using the search engine Google Scholar and ERIC and Sage Journal websites. Resources were peer-reviewed articles and scholarly books written in the last 5 years. The seminal works of Montessori and Malaguzzi were also included. Keywords searched to obtain these sources were as follows: *toddler environment, intentional environment, the Montessori prepared environment, environment as the third teacher, toddler curriculum, toddler environment, Infant/Toddler Environmental Rating Scale (ITERS Rating Scale), Reggio Emilia philosophy, Waldorf philosophy, High Scope philosophy, qualitative studies, emergent curriculum, continuity of care, and teacher work environment*. During the iterative search

process, I used different terms--for example, a toddler program, toddler curriculum, and teachers' perspectives--in the Walden University Library, Google Scholar, and ERIC databases, resulting in an exhaustive search of the research within the 5 years.

Conceptual Framework

I based the conceptual framework for this study on two concepts: Montessori's (1949) concept of the prepared environment and Malaguzzi's (1993) concept of the environment as the third teacher. These two concepts are based on both theorists' deep respect for and views of children as capable and competent beings, able to positively act on their environment (Malaguzzi, 1993; Montessori, 1949). In this section, I will describe the theories and concepts of both Montessori and Malaguzzi and provide information on how Montessori's and Malaguzzi's theories align.

Maria Montessori

Maria Montessori (1949) was an Italian physician whose research focused on her observations of children with special needs and how they learned and developed. Montessori observed children's behaviors, developmental capabilities, and actions while socializing with others (Kuh & Rivard, 2014). From these observations, Montessori determined that children needed to be active and able to explore their environments to develop and learn (Lillard & Jessen, 2008). As a result, Montessori developed a child-centered educational philosophy that promoted the belief that the teacher's creation of a prepared environment is essential for children's learning and development which occurs while they explore their environments (Kuh & Rivard, 2014). According to Montessori,

toddlers' optimum development and learning resides in a learning triangle formed by the teacher, the environment, and the child.

Montessori (1949) asserted that during the first 6 years of a child's life, his or her mind is open to everything; therefore, exposure to an enriched environment is essential for children's developing minds. In the seminal work of Lillard and Jessen (2008), the authors argued that the prepared environment should be age appropriate, clean, beautiful, stable, routine-oriented, and provide many hands-on materials for exploration allowing children to develop as independent individuals. The environment should have a familiar, predictable, and comfortable feeling that allows children the ability to explore freely.

According to Kovack and De Ros-Voseles (2015), toddlers need to be able to move freely in an environment where there is freedom of choice to explore and structure and order that supports toddlers' sensitive period for order. The toddler classroom environment (a) invites manipulation, exploration, and learning; (b) inspires children to become independent learners; (c) promotes toddlers' interaction with others; and (d) guides toddlers to use their cognitive capacities for language and creativity (Montessori, 1949). The Montessori teacher organizes and intentionally prepares a toddler environment that is beautiful and purposefully organized to show respect for each child's development (Kuh & Rivard, 2014; Lillard & Jessen, 2008). Lessons that involve children's exploration and manipulation of materials within the prepared environment intentionally become part of the toddler curriculum (Bussey & Hill, 2017; Kuh & Rivard, 2014; Lillard & Jessen, 2008). For example, because toddlers need consistency, order, and repetition to learn as they interact with their environments, toddler teachers prepare

the environment before the children arrive (Cross, 2018; Gopnik, 2017). Taking great care in preparing the environment shows respect toward children and gives toddlers a sense of ownership in the environment (Biermier, 2015; Cross, 2018; Gopnik, 2017; Lillard & Jessen, 2008; Montessori, 1949).

It is necessary for teachers to keep a consistent routine in an orderly environment to help toddlers develop a sense of internal order through activities that promote anticipation (Chazan-Cohen et al., 2017). According to Kovach and De Ros-Voseles (2015), order and consistency are keys for a successful toddler environment. Toddlers are developing in all physical/intellectual domains and have an internal sense of order. The order is necessary for the child to build a sense of security from their environment that will lead to healthy development as a whole individual and learning (Cassidy et al., 2017; Cross, 2018; Dalli & White, 2016; Gopnik, 2017; Gonzalez-Mena & Eyer, 2001; La Paro & Gloeckler, 2016). Montessori schools follow a sequence, repetition, and scope curriculum. Children work with lessons and concrete materials from different stages from simple to complex (Biermier, 2015; Edwards. 2003; Kuh & Rivard, 2014).

Loris Malaguzzi

Loris Malaguzzi (1998) was an Italian educator, world-renowned education philosopher, and founder of the Infant-Toddler Schools of Reggio Emilia. Malaguzzi believed that each human being could reach and construct his learning and development (Edwards & Gandini, 2017, 2018). He suggested that children have three types of teachers -- the actual educators, other children, and the environment (the third teacher) (Edwards & Gandini, 2018). Malaguzzi proposed that humans' knowledge develops from

experiences gained within their environments and through their life events. According to Malaguzzi, students' and teachers' collaborations are equally important during the learning process. His philosophy is child centered and promotes the view that the environment plays an imminent role while students are acquiring their knowledge (Edwards & Gandini, 2018; Kuh & Rivard, 2014).

The Reggio Emilia approach was founded in an emergent curriculum, which existed in child centered and student-teacher relationship-directed learning environments (Malaguzzi, 1998). Malaguzzi emphasized the importance of the teacher-student relationships and how the environment plays an important job in the children's development and learning (Edwards & Gandini, 2017, 2018; Kuh & Rivard, 2014). This environment is flexible, adaptable for children's needs and development, and encourages teachers and students to learn together (Malaguzzi, 1993). It also includes activities involving child-initiated play and lessons promoting independence and creativity by exploration and manipulation of hands-on materials (Edwards & Gandini, 2017, 2018; Kuh & Rivard, 2014; Malaguzzi, 1993). The curriculum in Reggio Emilia schools follows an emergent curriculum that consists of big and evolving projects that will lead to concrete learning, promotes independence, encourage the student's self-discipline, and stimulates their long-life learning (Edwards, 2003).

Alignment of Montessori's and Malaguzzi's Theories

The prepared environment and the concept of the environment as the third teacher provided the following framework. Also, the philosophies of Montessori and Malaguzzi for toddler environments aligned in the following ways: freedom of choice so toddlers

can explore and develop; structure and order to support toddlers' sensitive period for order; beauty to invite manipulation, exploration, and learning; nature and reality to inspire children to become independent learners; social environment that promotes toddlers' interaction with others; and intellectual environment that guides toddlers to use their cognitive capacities for language and creativity. Together these two concepts align with the problem statement, purpose, and significance of this study, as well as guide the questions and methodology. The conceptual framework aligned with the purpose of this research which was to determine teachers' perspectives on the prepared environment as a component of a toddler program curriculum. The RQs sought to discover teachers' perspectives on the prepared environment as a curricular practice that promotes optimum growth and development of competent and capable toddlers, who can act on their prepared environments and meet their developmental milestones and achieve optimum growth and development in all domains.

Studies based on Montessori's and Malaguzzi's philosophies supported the finding that children are active creators of their own development. Montessori's and Malaguzzi's curriculums are based on following students' pace and respecting each child (Gandini, 2017; Edwards, 2003). Both philosophers believed in their responsibilities to promote a sense of peace and harmony in the world for children as they grow and develop, to improve human society (Biermeier, 2015; Edwards, 2003; Gandini, 2017; Edwards & Gandini, 2018).

According to Edwards (2017), Montessori and Malaguzzi both argued that teachers are responsible for creating beautiful and inviting environments that promote

learning. According to Gandini and Edwards, the environment plays an essential part in childhood development and learning. Preparing the environment as part of the toddler curriculum is a team effort (Carey & Jones, 2016; Kuh, 2014; Knauf, 2018; Horm et al., 2018; Marrus et al., 2017; Price, 2018; Walls, 2018), so children develop a sense of belonging in their classrooms (Lippard, Riley & Hughes-Belding, 2016; Price, 2018). "Teachers depend on carefully prepared, aesthetically pleasing environments that serve as a pedagogical tool and provide strong messages about the curriculum and respect for children" (Edwards, 2003, p. 39).

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variables

In this section, I covered the components of the prepared environment for toddlers, the toddler classroom, and the toddler teacher. This section presented a summary and conclusions. All of the components presented in the study about prepared environments are found within the literature review. Key concepts related to the conceptual framework are presented.

Toddler Environments

Kovac and Da Ros-Voseles (2015) suggested the ideal toddler environment should be designed with toddlers in mind. The environment should reflect teachers' intentions to support toddlers' development (Gehl & Bohlander, 2018; McDonald, 2018). For example, toddler teachers take into consideration their students' sizes and developmental capabilities to avoid learning challenges that are unintentionally created when the environment is not appropriately prepared (Chazan-Cohen et al., 2017; Gonzalez-Mena & Eyer, 2001; Kovac & DaRos-Voseles, 2015). Toddlerhood seems to

be a unique and challenging developmental stage for children between the ages of 18 to 36 months old (Carey & Jones, 2016; Eckerman, 2017; Kovac & Da Ros-Voseles, 2015). Toddlers explore their environments and everyone and everything within as they use their environments to meet developmental milestones (Eckerman, 2017; Lorber et al., 2017). During toddlerhood, children master important developmental skills, such as walking, talking, and playing independently. Some toddlers also attempt to eat by themselves during this age period. Toddler teachers help their students make the transition into toddlerhood smoothly by maintaining a peaceful, orderly, and consistent environment (Corso, 2018; Cross, 2018; Eckerman, 2017; Gonzalez-Mena & Eyer, 2001; Kovac & Da Ros-Voseles, 2015; Horm et al., 2018; Price, 2018).

Prepared environment. The concept of a prepared environment originated with Maria Montessori; however, it has been embraced by most early childhood programs that strive to meet the children's developing needs (Kuh, 2014). Proponents of a prepared environment suggest the following characteristics are needed: a clean, well-designed room arrangement that facilitates activity and movement; age-appropriate materials and child-size furniture that are accessible to children; spaces that encourage exploration and manipulation of materials to promote intellectual development; space designs to encourage interactions with others that promote social development; and beautiful, orderly, and aesthetically pleasing surroundings (Conklin-Moore, 2017; Cross, 2018; Kuh & Rivard, 2014; Moran, Bove, Brookshire, Braga & Mantovani, 2017; Price, 2018). What is not known and is addressed by this study is toddler teachers' perspectives on the

prepared environment as an important feature of the toddler curriculum (Chazan-Cohen et al., 2017; Price, 2018).

According to Malaguzzi and Montessori, the prepared environment gives children opportunities to practice their skills, to explore with their senses, and to develop their minds and whole beings (Kuh & Rivard, 2014). Children can experience a natural learning process and explore their curiosity (Montessori, 1949). In preparing each part of the environment, teachers consider the toddlers' unique developmental stage and their needs in general. For example, the prepared environment is safe yet affords toddlers unrestricted active exploration. Furniture is child-size, materials are accessible, wall hangings are placed lower for children to see, lighting is natural, and authentic objects are present for children to explore (Kuh & Rivard, 2014; Montessori, 1949). In summary, Montessori believed that children's interactions with prepared environments are essential for their physical, social, and intellectual development.

Based on the literature and research about toddler environments, it can be concluded that there are different and important aspects of the toddler's prepared environments. According to Landry et al., (2014), the toddler curriculum needs to provide challenges to the students created by the environment. The toddler classroom environment needs to support development in the physical, social-emotional, fine motor skills, critical thinking, cognitive skills, and language developmental domains (Landry et al., 2014).

Third teacher. In considering the environment as the third teacher, the environment promotes critical thinking skills, inquiry, wonder, and investigation

(Malaguzzi, 1987; Malaguzzi, 1993). There are quiet areas for reading and individual activities, open areas for collaboration, group learning, and conversations with others (Malaguzzi, 1993). The environment is intentionally organized, inviting to the children, and aesthetically pleasing. Children learn how to be careful and responsible for delicate materials and resources their teachers' value and share in the environment (Edwards & Gandini, 2017, 2018; Kuh & Rivard, 2014; Malaguzzi, 1993). The environment as the third teacher promotes investigations, critical thinking, originality, problem solving, and concrete learning (Malaguzzi, 1993). The Reggio Emilia philosophy promotes the belief that when the environment supports exploring and independence, children will flourish in development and learning. The environment as a third teacher helps with toddler's behavior not giving space for irregularities or aggressiveness that can be caused by boredom in children (Biermier, 2015; Danko- McGhee & Slutsky, 2017; Edwards & Gandini, 2018; Hoffman & Kovalanka, 2019; Lorber, Del Vecchio & Slep, 2017).

Other toddler program environment. Other early childhood child-centered philosophies and approaches, such as High Scope, Waldorf, and Creative Curriculum have expressed the importance of the prepared environment as a component of toddler curriculum (Kuh & Rivard, 2014). According to the Waldorf, High Scope, and Creative Curriculum philosophies, children need to learn and develop in an inviting and beautiful environment (Araujo, Dormal & Schady, 2018; Epstein & Schweinhart, 2018; Gullickson, Cameron, Marose, Tifenthatler & Van Nice, 2018; Nicol, 2017; Sutherland & Mukadam, 2018; Wittshire, 2018; Wilson, 2017). These will be discussed in the following section.

Waldorf. According to Nicol (2016), at Waldorf schools' children seem enthusiastic about their environments and the experiences that they encounter while they are at school. Waldorf schools insist on quality teacher-student relationships in these environments (Nicol, 2016). Waldorf's philosophy focuses on the development of a child as a whole being and considers how important the environment is to promoting toddlers' social skills through play (Nicol, 2016). The Waldorf environment also promotes spiritual values which include the use of a peace curriculum as part of the children's daily activities, which is also practiced in Montessori toddler classrooms (Cross, 2018; Gullickson, Cameron, Marose, Tifenthatler & Van Nice, 2018; Sutherland & Mukadam, 2018; Wilson, 2017). Waldorf is often compared to Montessori because both philosophies consider that order is crucial in the toddler environment because of consistency in routines and specific placement of objects and materials in the prepared environments (Conklin-Moore, 2017; Cross, 2018; Wilson, 2017).

High Scope. The High Scope approach also emphasizes the importance of an environment prepared for toddlers' exploration of and active learning in their surroundings. Through investigation, examination, exploration, and play, toddlers meet their developmental milestones (Wittshire, 2018). The High Scope curriculum is emergent and child directed existing in institutions that serve the community, such as YMCA, hospital childcare programs, and church-based programs that believe in the importance of the prepared environment (Epstein & Schweinhart, 2018).

Creative Curriculum. Creative Curriculum is a system that facilitates professional training for teachers and textbooks about learning lessons and materials to teachers to

follow are available to programs that chose the curriculum (Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2002). Creative Curriculum guidance recommends that toddler teachers create a child-centered environment and curriculum (Dodge, Yandian & Bloomer, 1998).

Organizational Support for Centers

Some traditional curriculum approaches are eclectic and do not follow a set curriculum. Attention to the environment is less of a priority in some settings (Chazan-Cohen et al., 2017). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) reaches out to a toddler program administrators and caregivers, and advocates for high quality programs for toddler curriculum, assessments for toddlers, and rating scales that measure unique component of toddler environments as a component of toddler curriculum in order that toddlers meet their developmental milestones (Dodge, Yandian & Bloomer, 1998; Garrity, Longstreth & Linder, 2017; Knauf, 2018; Page 2017; Pandit, 2018). To achieve a high-quality a toddler program, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) recommends certain assessments and rating scales as important tools to identify how children are developing and learning in the early childhood settings (Cassidy et al., 2017; Garrity, Longdtreth & Linder, 2017).

Some assessments are specifically created to measure the effectiveness of the toddler environment in general, as well as social and language development. For example, there are the following: The Infant and Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS-R), the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), the Family Child care Environment Rating Scale (FCCERS), the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ), The Desired Results for Developmental Profile (DRDP), and the Early Language and

Literacy Classroom Observation tool (ELLCO) assessments (Cassidy et al., 2017; Knauf, 2018; La Paro, Williamson & Hatfield, 2014; Smith & Dickinson, 2002). ITERS and FCCERS examines the infant and toddler environments in the classroom occupied by children with ages up to 30 months old (Knauf, 2018). These assessments focus on the physical setting such as space, furniture, schedules, consistent routines, language, learning activities, teachers' and students' interactions, the quality of the program, and the response from parents and teachers (Knauf, 2018). The CLASS, DRDP, and ASQ assessments measures social interactions during the infant and toddler stages and is used as a tool for infant and toddler teachers to screen social-emotional development in their students and how the environment supports the children needs in this developmental domain (La Paro, Williamson & Hatfield, 2014). The ELLCO assessment examines how the classroom promotes language and early literacy. ELLCO prompts the assessor to examine the different teaching strategies, and how the children respond to the activities in the classroom (La Paro, Williamson & Hatfield, 2014). These tools are available for toddler teachers to use when they are creating their classroom environments in some programs.

Environmental Outcomes

Environments for toddlers affect children's growth and development (Hoffman & Kunalanka, 2019; Knauf, 2018; Price, 2018). Such factors as light, color, sound, and objects and materials in the classroom have an impact on toddlers. The factors in the toddler classroom environment are discussed in the following section and include the

following: sensory overload, natural light, neutral colors, children's work, intervention, teacher-student relationships, role model, and teacher talk.

Sensory overload. Price (2018) suggested that before toddler teachers set up their classrooms, several aspects of a prepared environment should be considered. According to Hoffman and Kuvalanka (2019) and Price (2019) one of the big challenges faced by teachers who prepare toddler environments is sensory overload of children. Research suggested that toddler teachers' lack knowledge and resources to prepare an environment that supports toddlers' developmental (Hoffman & Kuvalanka, 2019; Price, 2018). Price (2018) indicated further research is needed about how to support toddler teachers in designing appropriate toddler environments without unnecessary graphics and noise. Many toddler classrooms are unintentionally arranged in a way that causes sensory overload to very children because unaware toddler teachers mimic classrooms designs for older children (Price, 2018).

Price (2018), warned that when very young children are exposed to sensory overload, it can interrupt optimum brain development and learning. Also, it can alter toddler's emotional behavior (Hoffman & Kuvalanka, 2019). Price (2018) provided frequent reasons for sensory overload in toddlers, as follows: too many materials, choices, or toys available for the children in the classroom; too many bright colors; artificial lighting; loud music; too many adults in the classroom. Price (2018) stated, "Unfortunately, many early care and education classrooms are unintended traps for visual and auditory overload. Too much noise that children see or hear that makes processing any single sight or sound difficult" (p. 2).

Safe environment. The toddler classroom should provide a safe environment. It is the toddler teacher's job to look for their students' safety (Araujo et al., 2018; Boag-Munroeg, 2015; Price, 2018; Uhlenberg, 2016). For example, electric outlets should be covered; furniture needs to be child size to avoid falling. Researchers recommend separate areas for play and open spaces for exploration (Araujo et al., 2018; Boag-Munroeg, 2015; Cassidy et al., 2017). Toddler teachers separate the classroom into academic and play areas that will promote learning and exploration (Araujo et al., 2018; Boag-Munroeg, 2015; Cassidy et al., 2017; Price, 2018). Overall, researchers suggested the key to a successful and effective toddler classroom, teachers need to promote consistency and it needs to be found in their daily routine (Corso, 2018; Horm et al., 2018; Moran et al., 2017; Price, 2018). According to Horm et al. and Moran et al., routine is important for toddlers to develop, likewise repetition and consistency. These factors help toddlers develop internal order and to develop self-confidence while learning.

Natural light. Knauf (2018) and Price (2018), suggested that toddler teachers allow natural light into the classroom. Natural light prevents over-stimulation and promote learning (Marrus et al., 2017). However, excessively bright light could be disturbing for toddlers (Gopnik, 2017; Knauf, 2018; Kovach & De Ros-Voseles, 2015; Price, 2018).

Neutral colors. Bright colors could create overstimulated responses from toddlers (Gopnik, 2017; Price, 2018). Excessive bright colors seem to disturb children behavior and alter a classroom atmosphere (Marruz et al., 2017; Price, 2018). Neutral colors in the

classroom can be inviting and have several advantages, for example, serving boundaries (Carey & Jones, 2016; Knauf, 2018; Marrus et al., 2017; Montessori, 1949; Price, 2018).

Children's work displayed. When teachers display the children's work in the classroom, it encourages them to learn and also, helps them develop the senses of object permanence and self-confidence (Carey & Jones, 2016; Corso, 2018; Knauf, 2018; Marrus et al., 2017; Price, 2018). Displays of children's work was found to create a sense of ownership for space (Knauf, 2018; Marrus et al., 2017). When students' work is displayed researchers recommended that it should be exposed without clutter (Carey & Jones, 2016; Corso, 2018; Price, 2018).

Consistency. The prepared environment should provide the children with a peaceful atmosphere, and part of this peaceful setting is brought from consistency (Corso, 2018; Horm et al., 2018; Price, 2018). Carey and Jones (2016), Carso (2018), and Cross (2018) emphasized that toddler materials in the environment have a specific purpose, including sounds that are heard. Researchers recommendations are for instrumental, natural sounding or classical music played at a low volume, which it will help to create a peaceful atmosphere for children to develop and to learn properly (Carey & Jones, 2016; Corso, 2018; Cross, 2018; Knauf, 2018; Price, 2018).

Intervention. Morrisey, Scott, and Wishart (2015) suggested that toddler environments need to fill the toddler's developmental delays, including delays in emotional and physical domains. Because children achieve many developmental milestones during their first three years of life, the experiences they encounter during this time usually determine how they handle situations emotionally and physically in their

futures (Hoffman & Kovalanka, 2019; Morrisey et al., 2015). It is, therefore, crucial that toddlers are placed in a stable, consistent, and enriching environment (Carey & Jones, 2016; Corso, 2018; Kuh, 2014; Knauf, 2018; Horm et al., 2018; Malaguzzi, 1993; Marrus et al., 2017; Montessori, 1949; Norris, 2017).

Hoffman and Kovalanka (2019) and Norris (2017) found that the prepared environment helps with behavioral problems and language development. Hoffman and Kovalanka (2019), warned that teachers should develop an authentic understanding of the causes of behavioral problems in their classrooms. For example, problems present at toddler classrooms these days could be a consequence of a poor environment arrangement, such as lack of space, poor planning, or sensory overload (Hoffman & Kovalanka, 2019; Norris, 2017; Price, 2018).

Hooper and Hallam (2017), suggested that it is extremely important for toddlers to engage, develop a relationship, and feel invited by their environment and surroundings. When children show engagement in their physical and social relationships, they will develop smoothly (Hooper & Hallam, 2017). Toddler's engagement with their environment is an indicator of a higher quality learning program that fosters learning in all developmental domains for typical toddlers, as well with children who need interventions (Hooper & Hallam, 2017).

Teacher, parent, and child relationships. An important part of the prepared environment is the teacher's relationship with children and their families (Corso, 2018). Toddler teachers must build nurture and responsive interactions with their students. Also, a partnership relationship with the student's families will be favorable for all and develop

trust (Corso, 2018; Swartz & Easterbrooks, 2014). According to Swartz and Easterbrooks (2014), parent-teacher interactions and their healthy relationships, are a big help when behavioral issues are present in the classroom. When toddlers receive positive and consistent messages from home, school, and the adults in the children's environments their transition to toddlerhood seems smooth (Corso, 2018; Swartz & Eaterbrooks, 2014).

Role model. The adult's behavior in the classroom respectfully promotes role modeling for the developing toddler (Corso, 2018; Knauf, 2018; Horm et al., 2018; 2018; Price, 2018). At the toddler care level, teachers control what children experience such as things children can reach, what they see, what they smell, taste, and so on (Corso, 2018; Price, 2018). Casey and Jones (2016) proposed that when the toddler teacher model the appropriate tone of voice, gestures, and body movements; children will mimic the teachers and will help them learn (Carey & Jones, 2016; Corso, 2018; Price, 2018).

Teacher talk. Toddler teachers work consistently and relay consistent messages to children. Teacher interactions with other adults create order and consistency in the prepared toddler environment. Teachers need to work as a team to create a consistent message to model appropriate behavior to the children and for them to understand what is expected in the classroom (Corso, 2018). Corso (2018) stressed that when teachers model and talk positively to the children, it helps them to develop the sense of respect towards others (Corso, 2018). Teachers act as guides, helping children explore possibilities through consistent routines that children adapt to his/her environment, thrive as individuals, and be intrinsically motivated (Horm et al., 2018).

Summary and Conclusions

In Chapter 2, I identified the literature search strategy for the review of the relevant literature and the conceptual framework to provide a foundation for exploring toddler teachers' perspectives on the prepared environment as a component of toddler program curricula. I reviewed current literature on the well-known early childhood philosophies, approaches, and curricula followed today such as Montessori, Reggio Emilia, Waldorf, Creative Curriculum, and High Scope. These were chosen because all of these programs support the importance of a prepared environment to support children in meeting their developmental milestones. Each program suggests toddlers receive care and education in an enriched and appropriate environment for children to learn and develop. These approaches pay close attention to the components of the prepared environment. In Chapter 3, the methodology, research design and questions and their link to the conceptual framework. I will also present the process for inviting, selecting, and interviewing participants. Information about the instrumentation is also provided.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this basic qualitative study with interviews was to explore teachers' perspectives on a prepared environment as a component of a toddler program curriculum. In Chapter 3, I discuss the research design and rationale for the qualitative paradigm. I also describe my role as researcher, the participant selection process, instrumentation, and data analysis plan. Additionally, I address elements of trustworthiness and the ethical procedures followed. Chapter 3 concludes with a summary for this chapter.

Research Design and Rationale

For this qualitative study, I used interviews to explore toddler teachers' perspectives on a prepared environment as a component of a a toddler program curriculum. The rationale was to gain a deeper understanding of toddler teachers' perspectives. The three RQs that I sought to answer were as follows:

RQ1: What are toddler teachers' perspectives on a prepared environment as a component of a a toddler program curriculum that will promote optimal growth and development of toddlers?

RQ2: What are toddler teachers' perspectives on the concept of the environment as a third teacher as a component of a toddler program curriculum that will promote optimal growth and development of toddlers?

RQ3: What are toddler teachers' perspectives on the types of resources and supports they need to implement a prepared environment as a component of a a toddler program curriculum?

The purpose of this qualitative study with interviews was to explore teachers' perspectives on a prepared environment as a component of a toddler program curriculum. The central phenomenon of this study involved the prepared environment and its relationship to toddlers' meeting of developmental milestones. I solicited toddler teacher participants from a variety of programs who had been in the profession for a minimum of 3 years. The problem in this study involved limited knowledge about the environment that teachers could answer in their own words. I decided to conduct a qualitative study with interviews. Qualitative researchers focus on people's opinions, ideas, and points of view about specific topics (Creswell, 2008; Meyer, 2015). Qualitative studies are designed to focus on individuals or communities, with data collected using methods such as interviewing, observation, and review of relevant documents (Creswell, 2008; Malterud et al., 2016; Meyer, 2015). According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), in a basic qualitative study with interviews, participants can share their perspectives more directly with researchers.

The data came from semistructured interviews with 12 toddler teachers from eight different toddler programs in the Southwestern United States. I had originally intended to conduct individual semistructured interviews in person (with audio recording), using open-ended questions and prompts in order to identify toddler teachers' perspectives; however, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Walden University IRB provided approval for researchers to conduct interviews via e-mail and telephone calls. I conducted the interviews by phone and followed up for member checking by e-mail. The qualitative methodology let me explore how toddler teachers perceive the toddler

environment. In the interviews, participants shared their perspectives and elaborated about their experiences of being intentional in preparing the environment as a component of the toddler curriculum. As the researcher, I transcribed, coded, and analyzed all interview responses. Data revealed emerging themes related to teachers' perspectives on a prepared environment as a component of a toddler program curriculum.

Role of the Researcher

In my research role, I was responsible for interviewing, recording, transcribing, and analyzing data received from 12 toddler teachers from eight different toddler programs located throughout a large urban area in the Southwestern United States. I have more than 25 years of experience as a teacher for toddlers and an educator for toddler teachers. However, I was not employed or known by any of the toddler centers in the suburban area where I conducted this study. To avoid researcher bias or ethical issues, I followed an interview protocol that was written as a script in order to use the same language and questions during each interview. I intended to provide each participant with the same amount of time to respond during the semistructured interviews, however, participants' responses determined the time that was spent during this process. I had originally intended to conduct individual semistructured interviews in person (with digital audio recorder), using open-ended questions and prompts in order to identify toddler teachers' perspectives. However, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Walden University IRB provided approval for researchers to conduct interviews via e-mail and/or telephone calls. I, therefore, was able to conduct interviews by telephone and followed up for member checking by e-mail. During this process, I kept a reflective journal to aid me

in becoming self-aware of any bias I might bring to the research process (see Sandvick & McCormack, 2018).

Methodology

The participant population of the study included toddler teachers. The methodological approach that I adopted in this study was a basic qualitative study with interviews. I collected data from open-ended questions. The interview responses were coded and analyzed to reveal emerging themes (see Creswell, 2013) related to teachers' perspectives on a prepared environment as a component of a toddler program curriculum. I chose this type of study because qualitative studies are not specific methods; rather, they are used by researchers as a study strategy (Malterud et al., 2016; Meyer, 2015). Researchers conducting qualitative studies gather data by obtaining peoples' opinions, often following an interview protocol. In this study, interviewing was the best method of exploring teachers' perspectives on a prepared environment as a component of a toddler program curriculum.

In this qualitative research, I focused on participants' perspectives, characteristics, and symbols (Malterud et al., 2016; Meyer, 2015). According to Meyer (2015), this type of research strategy "leads researchers to limit the number and size of under investigation" (p. 8). I conducted the study in eight toddler environments that reflected different early childhood education philosophies.

Participant Selection

In this interview study the population were toddler teachers, I explored 12 toddler teachers' perspectives on the prepared environment as a component of a toddler program

curriculum. Participants were recruited and selected who met the following criteria: currently working in toddler care and education; minimum of 3 years working in toddler care and education; and current with training required by the industry and state to work in toddler care and education. These 12 teachers were working in eight distinct toddler environments, which reflected a variety of early childhood philosophies. Twelve teachers constituted an adequate sample size to acquire sufficient data for the study (see Creswell, 2013). To identify, contact, and recruit participants, I asked toddler program directors to provide toddler teachers' e-mail addresses so that I could contact them and ask them for their participation. In this e-mail, I explained to them the purpose of the study and attached the consent form. The participants responded voluntarily to the e-mail, consenting to be in the study, and reviewed their rights as volunteers.

Instrumentation

The data collection instruments that I used in this study were an interview protocol and a digital audio recorder. I developed the interview protocol, which was reviewed and validated by an expert in the field of toddler education. I followed this researcher-developed interview protocol to collect data from the toddler teachers' responses to six semistructured, open-ended questions. Questions and prompts used in the interviews were asked in the same way for each interview. The digital audio recorder was used for all interviews. I also used my journal and included handwritten notes to be able to select appropriate prompts as needed.

To determine the validity of the interview questions, I consulted an infant expert specializing in toddler care and education with expertise and credentials as a member of

the Resources for Infant Educators (RIE). This infant expert based her support of the interview questions and the conceptual framework on 10 years of experience in the field as a consultant with specializations in creating toddler environments and writing a toddler program curriculum. Interviews were intended to take place at a public location chosen by each participant and me, prior to COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, interviews were conducted by e-mail and phone because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Interview questions were aligned with the RQs as shown in Table 1. I sought to discover toddler teachers' perspectives on the use of a prepared environment (RQ1 and RQ2) as a curricular practice that promotes optimal growth and development of competent and capable toddlers. Toddler teachers gave their perspectives about toddlers' interactions with resources and materials in prepared environments (RQ3) in order that the toddlers might construct their knowledge and skills in order to meet developmental milestones. Interview questions were written in a professional manner, using language that all toddler teachers would understand. The interviews included open-ended questions about participants' perspectives on how children learned in their environments and about the teaching curriculum. I was looking for rich and detailed information from the toddler teachers (see Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Table 1

Research Questions Aligned With Interview Questions

Research questions	Interview questions
RQ1. What are toddler teachers' perspectives on a prepared environment as a component of a toddler program curriculum that will promote optimum growth and development of toddlers?	1 Please define the term prepared environment in your own words. 2 Please talk about how you include the environment when planning your curricula.
RQ2. What are toddler teachers' perspectives on the concept of the environment as a third teacher as a component of a toddler program curriculum that will promote optimum growth and development of toddlers?	3 Please describe the environment as the "third teacher" in your own words. 4 Please discuss what toddlers learn from the environment.
RQ3. What are toddler teachers' perspectives on the types of resources and supports they need to implement a prepared environment as a component of a toddler program curriculum?	5 Please tell me about types of resources and supports you feel are important to support toddlers' optimal development. 6 Please give me examples of how you include resources and supports in your curriculum.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Following IRB approval, I began the recruitment process and sought the approval of a toddler program directors or administrators by e-mail (see Appendix A). I followed a script, explaining who I was and the purpose of my study. I introduced myself and explained my intentions and my desire to interview the toddler teachers to learn their perspectives on the prepared environment as a component of a toddler program curriculum. I requested the director's permission to provide me with participants' emails to send a letter of invitation and an informed consent form agreeing to volunteer for the study. In the e-mail, I asked the teachers to contact me on my telephone or via e-mail. The invitation letter for participants included the purpose of the study, my phone number,

the informed consent form, and my e-mail address. I asked participants to keep a copy of the consent for their files.

I explained in detail the intentions of the study and disclosed my intentions to protect the participant's privacy during the process. After the participants agreed with the intentions of the study, we confirmed the dates and locations for the interviews. I intended to record the interviews using a digital tape recorder; however, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, I gained IRB approval to conduct the interviews via e-mail or telephone calls. I transcribed all interviews made by phone. I also kept a journal with sections for each participant using alphanumeric coding. The digital data collected were located on a password-protected laptop that only I have access to; the hard-copy data were locked in a security box to only I have access in my home office, where it will remain for 5 years before I destroy them.

The interviews included open-ended questions that, when answered, allowed me to compile the toddler teachers' perspectives about the prepared environment. The interview questions and protocol are included in Appendix B. After the collection of data, I used a simple coding system to divide and analyze the different categories and responses. I used to be the Saldaña coding system. Based on *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, Saldaña (2015) suggested that the process of data collection is facilitated when data is collected during interviews and responses are recorded and transcribed. I was able to code (categorize, identify, and group) information that toddlers' teachers provided during the interviews (see Saldaña, 2015). This coding system facilitated the analysis of the acquired data. I used structural coding and

descriptive coding to gather and categorize the general information given by toddler teachers during interviews (see Saldaña, 2015). I used these coding types to identify themes that resulted from toddler teachers' perspectives. Participants were free to stop participation in the study at any time without any consequences in their jobs or lives. I encouraged participants to engage in member checks.

Data Analysis Plan

Data collected were from the toddler teachers' responses to interview questions about their perspectives about the toddler environment and its importance for creating curriculum for toddlers' learning and development. The questions were part of the interview protocol found in Appendix B. I collected and transcribed the interview responses. I listened and read interviews carefully several times during the transcription phase. I transcribed the teachers' answers from the phone interviews manually as soon as possible after each interview. When all the data were categorized, I used a system of coding to subdivide the different categories in patterns and or themes. I used the Saldaña (2015) coding method. While I analyzed data, I used different themes and patterns from the teachers' responses. I identified the patterns and themes by reading the responses I had transcribed from the interview recordings. I highlighted themes and created a list of codes. I identified specific perspectives and ideas that aligned with the study's RQs. I followed Saldaña's (2015) coding system outlined in *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. I transcribed the participant's responses using a recording device on my cell-phone. I analyzed the responses to understand toddler teachers' perspectives on a prepared environment as an important component of toddler education curriculum during

the toddlerhood stage of development and learning. During this study, I did not use any software for data management. Teachers' responses to interview questions were similar and 5 common themes and subthemes emerged during data analysis. No discrepant cases were present in this study.

Trustworthiness

This study included trustworthiness and the main factors found in qualitative studies, including: confirmability, credibility, dependability, transferability, and authenticity. I showed trustworthiness and authenticity to the participants by communicating to them the intentions of the study to ensure credibility and confidentiality. To ensure credibility and to avoid bias while conducting the interviews, I asked the same questions and used the same language with all the participants by following an interview protocol. All participants were fluent in English. Each participant had an anonymous identity during the interview process. I ensured credibility by returning to the audio tapes and transcripts, and keeping a record of the responses from the qualitative interviews.

This study was too small to achieve transferability of findings. However, data represented the collection and analysis of these 12 toddler teachers' perspectives. Learning these perspectives may provide insight to other toddler teachers, administrators, and teacher educators who may read this study. The results from this study revealed toddler teachers' perspectives about the toddler environment as part of toddler curriculum. Based on the qualitative interviews, the results showed confirmability and

objectivity coming from the teachers' perspectives because the responses came from 12 teachers from eight different education programs and philosophies.

Ethical Procedures

I designed objective questions for the qualitative interviews to avoid bias opinions or statements. I followed an interview protocol and asked the same questions and used the same language with all 12 participants. All participants were fluent in English. The eight toddler education settings included different early childhood education philosophies, and I examined, studied, and analyzed each one. I conducted the study in an ethical manner following the appropriate guidelines to ensure participants' confidentiality and rights. For example, I invited potential participants and received their consent by e-mail. The informed consent form was available prior to the beginning of the study as per Walden IRB requirements.

The responses from the qualitative interviews were revealed just to me and not shared with other participants. I followed the script prior to beginning the interview. I conducted the interviews by email and/or telephone with each participant. Participants were allowed to leave the interviews and the study at any moment without any consequences or repercussions. I transcribed the interview responses. I kept a reflective journal during the study. The data collection followed an interview protocol so that information given and questions asked were consistent among all participants. All questions were open-ended and semistructured to facilitate the participants' ease in giving honest information about their perspectives. In order to maintain consistency, I followed the script. Data obtained as digital audio tapes and transcripts of interviews were stored in

a secure, locked cabinet in a location for 5 years in my home office that only I have access to. The data collected and results will remain anonymous.

Summary

The purpose of this basic qualitative study with interviews was to explore teachers' perspectives on the prepared environment as a component of a toddler program curriculum. Qualitative studies focus on people's opinions, ideas, and points of view about specific topics (Creswell, 2008; Meyer, 2015). Qualitative studies are designed to focus on individuals or communities, and data of these studies are collected from methods such as interviews, observations notes, and relevant documents (Creswell, 2008; Malterud et al., 2016; Meyer, 2015). This basic qualitative study with interviews methodology paradigm chosen by me, facilitated my role as a researcher. Toddler teachers' perspectives were collected in interview data and were analyzed to answer the three RQs of this study. Findings from this study have the potential to help early childhood education stakeholders recognize the importance of environments in toddler education. In Chapter 3, I presented methodology for a basic qualitative study with interviews. In Chapter 4 I identify and describe findings of this study; and in Chapter 5, discuss findings and potential implications for positive social change in toddler education.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore toddler teachers' perspectives on the prepared environment as a component of a toddler program curriculum. The conceptual framework focused on the prepared environment, which originated with Maria Montessori (1949) and was further promoted by Loris Malaguzzi (1993) as environment as the third teacher. The RQs were the following:

RQ1: What are toddler teachers' perspectives on a prepared environment as a component of a toddler program curriculum that will promote optimum growth and development of toddlers?

RQ2: What are toddler teachers' perspectives on the concept of environment as third teacher as a component of a toddler program curriculum that will promote optimum growth and development of toddlers?

RQ3: What toddler are teachers' perspectives on the types of resources and supports they need to implement a prepared environment as a component of toddler program curriculum?

This study addressed a gap in the research by focusing on the prepared environment as an important feature of toddler curriculum (see Chazan-Cohen et al., 2017; see Kuh & Rivard, 2014). In Chapter 4, I present the findings of the study.

Setting

After receiving Walden University's IRB approval to conduct my study, I obtained permission from the regional licensing board administrator for child care programs to conduct the study. The programs are located in suburban areas of a large

metropolitan region in the Southwestern United States. Having been approved by the child care licensing administrator, I was provided with e-mail addresses of teachers who met criteria of the study in eight different programs ranging from federal, state, for-profit, not-for-profit, and home-based child care programs. I then sent e-mails to 14 individual teachers inviting them to participate in semistructured interviews by telephone with follow-up member checking by e-mail. All potential volunteers received a letter of informed consent as an attachment to the e-mail, which provided information about the study and their rights as potential participants. Twelve volunteers replied to the email giving their consent to participate in the study and their telephone contact information and a time for the interview. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, I had planned to conduct face-to-face interviews at public libraries within a private room or nook; however, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Walden University's IRB approved each researcher's ability to interview via e-mail or by telephone. Therefore, all interviews with the 12 participants were conducted by telephone with follow-up emails for the member checking process.

All volunteers were toddler program teachers who were currently employed in eight different programs for toddlers in the Southwestern United States. Table 2 designates the teachers' alphanumeric codes, years in their positions as toddler professionals, and the types and overarching philosophies of the programs. All participants had 3 or more years of experience working in the toddler environment. Four teachers had 10 or more years of experience working with toddlers. The participants worked in different types of programs, such as Head Start, university or college lab

school, child care center, and home care program. A toddler programs followed different philosophies and methods that included the following: Creative Curriculum, Montessori, Reggio Emilia, and Waldorf. All programs provided group-based care for toddlers. All programs were licensed under the state’s childcare licensing agency, and all personnel working in the programs were current with all mandated training and required certifications.

Table 2

Participants’ Experience in Toddler Education by Type of Program

Teacher pseudonym	Years working with toddlers	Type of program and philosophies
T1	19	Head Start (Reggio Emilia)
T2	15	Home care (Waldorf)
T3	5	Childcare center (Waldorf)
T4	3	Lab school (Creative Curriculum)
T5	12	Lab school (Creative Curriculum)
T6	6	Home care (Reggio Emilia)
T7	10	Head Start (Waldorf)
T8	4	Childcare center (Montessori)
T9	3	Lab school (Montessori)
T10	3	Lab school (Montessori)
T11	8	Head Start (Reggio Emilia)
T12	3	Childcare center (Montessori)

Data Collection

After IRB approval (#03-05-200130289) was granted, I began recruitment of volunteers for the study. A total of 12 teacher volunteers from eight different toddler settings consented to participate in this study. The interview responses from these 12

participants became the data for this study. Each interview was conducted by phone with a follow-up e-mail. Each interview was digitally audio recorded, and I transcribed participants' responses. Interview transcriptions and reflective journal entries also became data of this study. All digitally recorded audio files were stored on my password-protected laptop. Hard copies of data are locked in a security box in my home office where they will remain for 5 years, after which they will be shredded and disposed of according to Walden University's protocol.

I conducted interviews between April 18 and May 8, 2020. At the beginning of the interviews, I again advised participants of their rights and given opportunities to ask questions. Each participant confirmed that they understood they could stop or exit the study at any time. All teachers who volunteered consented to participate and expressed that they were comfortable being part of the process. All participants expressed their perspectives on toddler program environment without signs of distress. After each interview, I thanked the teachers and expressed how valuable their input was for the study. Participants were informed that their programs and each of them individually would receive copies of the summary after the study had been approved. As illustrated in Table 2, all participants and the locations of their programs are anonymous in this dissertation.

Data Analysis

While listening to digitally audio recorded tapes several times, I carefully transcribed each participant's responses and prepared alphanumeric coded transcripts. As I read the transcribed teachers' responses, I was careful to remain objective and not add

my personal views about the topics. I also conducted the member checking process via e-mail with each participant. Without exception, all participants assured me that all the summarized data were accurate and reflected their perspectives. Upon receiving participants' confirmation about the accuracy of their data, I started the coding process.

I followed Saldaña's (2015) coding system. As part of the process, I created a horizontal diagram of the conceptual framework on a large piece of paper hung on the wall. On the diagram I created for the conceptual framework, I highlighted key words within theories and concepts of my conceptual framework on the sketch. I was able to use this visual to see how theories of Montessori and Malaguzzi aligned in a concrete visual manner. As I read and reread interview transcripts, I wrote key words and phrases on sticky notes and labeled the sticky notes with the alphanumeric code for each participant. I followed this process with all interview transcripts. This process helped me to follow the coding process and identify common themes in participants' responses. I also color coded by highlighting code words and themes to organize and recognize patterns from participants' responses. From this process, I identified five themes that described teachers' behaviors based on their perspectives and that aligned with my three RQs: (a) enacting developmentally appropriate and culturally sensitive teaching philosophies, (b) preparing the environment as a third teacher, (c) observing and assessing children in the environment, (d) adapting environments to support all children in meeting developmental milestones, and (e) building relationships with children, families, and communities. I also documented notes in my reflective journal where I kept all the most relevant information from the participants' responses such as favorite quotes and examples from the

participants' responses. The process took many reviews over several months to reexamine and analyze responses from participants. I reached data saturation when the participants' responses to interview questions were similar and no common themes, subthemes, and patterns emerged during data analysis. No discrepant cases were present in this study.

Themes From Research Question 1

The first RQ focused on toddler teachers' perspectives of a prepared environment as a component of a toddler program curriculum that will promote toddlers' optimum growth and development toward meeting their developmental milestones. Five themes emerged for RQ1 while conducting interviews, as follows: enacting teaching philosophies, preparing the environment, observing and assessing children in the environment, supporting children's developmental milestones, and building relationships with children, families, and communities. Participants described how they set up their toddler environments based on their teaching philosophies. All toddler program teacher mentioned how important it was that they were introduced to a range of philosophies and theories during their teacher preparation programs. Toddler teachers conveyed that their own professional development and continuous education are necessary in order to be able to develop a successful toddler environment that is developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive.

Participants stressed how important it is for teachers to observe children for their interests and learned skills in order to prepare the environment. Participants explained that observing children helped them become aware of children's need to develop

additional skills to interact in the environment prior to deciding how to design the space. Unanimously, teachers mentioned the importance of observing and assessing to support children's needs based on their own knowledge of child development. Teachers felt that children's abilities to meet developmental milestones are essential aspects to consider while preparing the toddler environment. Developing and maintaining strong team relationships among their teaching communities, and children and parents were also emphasized.

Subthemes that aligned with the five themes in RQ1 emerged from the data. These subthemes and their alignment with themes are as follows: communication between teachers and parents (alignment with building relationships with children, families, and communities); knowledge of child development (alignment with supporting children's developmental milestones); observations and assessments of children's developmental levels, children's interests, children's pace for learning (alignment with observing and assessing children in the environment); maintenance of safe, sanitary, and clean environments (alignment with preparing the environment as the third teacher); importance of teacher preparation and continued professional learning, and provisions for aesthetics/beauty (alignment with enacting teaching philosophy); role of modeling as teaching practice (alignment with supporting children's developmental milestones). The importance of these subthemes taken from commonly repeated words and phrases by participants are discussed further in this chapter.

Themes From Research Question 2

RQ2 focused on toddler teachers' perspectives about the toddler environment as a third teacher in a toddler program curriculum, and how it promotes toddlers' growth and development. After reviewing data for RQ 2, I found that teachers shared common terms and phrases related to the environment as a third teacher that included five themes, as follows: enacting teaching philosophies, preparing the environment, observing and assessing children in the environment, supporting children's developmental milestones, and building relationships with children and families.

Toddler program teachers interviewed mentioned that while observing children in the environment, they recognized that the concept of the environment as the third teacher is supportive of children's developmental needs. Teachers indicated that they use their teaching philosophies to make choices about how the environment functions as the third teacher. Teachers stressed that relationships with children and their families help ensure communication is two way in support of children's achievements of their developmental milestones. Teachers expressed how important the teaching community in their programs support children during times when assessments are needed to make modifications and adaptations so the environment is inclusive. Several subthemes were revealed in interview data specifically related to the concept of environment as a third teacher, as follows: adaptability, explorability, observability, and predictability. Following these subthemes, teachers stressed that places and spaces for toddlers must be safe, orderly, clean, and functional so that children are able to adapt, explore, observe, and predict. The importance of themes and subthemes are discussed further in this chapter.

Themes From Research Question 3

RQ3 invited toddler teachers to discuss their perspectives about the types of resources and supports they received or needed to implement the prepared environment as a component of a toddler program curriculum. The following four themes were found during teachers' responses to RQ3, as follows: enacting teaching philosophies, observing and assessing children in the environment, supporting children's developmental milestones, and building relationships with children, families, and communities. Some teachers suggested that resources and supports provided by their program administrators were based on different circumstances of individual teachers. Teachers mentioned that some resources that were provided by the program depended upon the teaching philosophy of the program -- Creative Curriculum, Montessori, Reggio Emilia, or Waldorf. Teachers mentioned that there were specific resources provided for all classrooms in the program by the state's department of education. Many of the resources available from the DOE were assessments, screening kits, and evaluation instruments. In some programs, teachers stated that they requested simple resources directly from toddlers' parents as they were needed for individual children or due to a special project the children would be engaged in. Teachers mentioned that when working with individual children, they observed and communicated with children's families about resources that would benefit their children. As they partnered with families, teachers reported that they were able to individualize based on children's interests and their developmental needs. Teachers identified families as the most important and helpful resources. Subthemes related to RQ3 were as follows: teachers' observations (alignment with observing and

assessing children in the environment), therapists' interventions (supporting children's developmental milestones), former teachers' anecdotal records (alignment with observing and assessing children in the environment and building relationships with children, families, and communities), importance of developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive learning materials and resources (alignment with preparing the environment as a third teacher); and developmentally and culturally appropriate assessments (alignment with observing and assessing children in the environment). Among the assessments made available through the state DOE and used in all programs were, as follows:

Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS), Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale (FCCERS), Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP), and Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ). These subthemes are discussed further in this chapter.

Data Collection, Management, and Analysis

For data collection, management, and analysis, I did not use a software program other than what is available on my laptop's operating system. No external software package was employed for the study. The participation criteria required for this study was that all teacher participants had to have been working in toddler program setting for 3 years or more. Each participant in the study had 3 or more years of experience working with toddlers (see Table 2). Teachers' responses to semistructured interview questions revealed common themes, subthemes, and patterns that emerged during data analysis. Data saturation was reached. No discrepant cases were present in this study.

Results

Toddler teachers in this study were asked 6 interview questions, which were followed by prompts as needed. I followed an interview protocol to ensure that all teachers were asked the same RQs. As toddler program teachers responded during the interviews, I took notes in my reflective journal where I placed teachers' individual alphanumeric codes. I used the reflective journal to remain biased and accurately record teachers' responses. The findings reported from this study reflect the codes used, and themes, subthemes, and patterns that emerged from data collected during interviews with 12 toddler program teachers about the prepared environment as a component of a toddler program curriculum. The RQs were based on the conceptual framework. The 12 toddler teachers participated voluntarily, and each expressed their eagerness to participate in the interview process and share their information about the toddler environments that each prepared for the children in their programs. Data collected from participants enabled me to answer both RQs. Data collected also helped me with analysis and possible recommendations for further research about this topic.

Results: Research Question 1

In this section, I present findings for RQ 1: What are toddler teachers' perspectives of a prepared environment as a component of a a toddler program curriculum that will promote optimum growth and development of toddlers? All toddler teachers gave me descriptive responses about their perspectives and experiences while answering RQ1. Based on their responses, teachers seemed to fully understand the questions and no discrepancies in information were evident during the process. To begin

the interview, I asked toddler teachers to give me their personal definitions of the term "prepared environment." Each participant was asked to elaborate on how the prepared environment supports children's developmental needs. In reviewing responses to RQ1, I repeatedly listened to audio tapes and read transcripts. As a result of coding and analysis of RQ1, five themes related to the prepared environment emerged, as follows: enacting teaching philosophies, preparing the environment as the third teacher, observing and assessing children in the environment, supporting children's developmental milestones, and building relationships with children, families, and communities. These themes will be presented in an abbreviated form in the following section along with relevant quotes from participants.

Preparing the Environment. Teachers expressed similar perspectives about the prepared environment. All teachers believed that the prepared environment is an essential part of toddler learning and curriculum. In giving their perspectives, teachers shared that in preparing the environment they reflected and planned for children's ways of learning in an inclusive manner; they used their knowledge of child development and theories to consider children's developmental domains; and they carefully designed the environment in a developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive manner with the children's needs in mind.

Participant T1 stated, "The environment needs to include precise elements taking into consideration the physical, social-emotional, cognitive, and spiritual development of the children."

Participant T9 said that the prepared environment “creates an awe of wonder and excitement, attracting the visual attention of the child, all while meeting the child’s needs with functionality, accessibility, beauty, grace, and purpose.”

Participant T10 expressed her perspective that “the environments are the keys to each child’s success and skill building.” She elaborated on this topic and talked about how she placed materials in the classroom to create specific teaching moments and capture what children are playing with in her observational notes and assessments. Participant T10 continued this topic, “I look at how they are playing with the chosen materials, how they are scaffolding their own play, what body parts they are using...more or less. I strive to think about the whole child’s development and how they can use the environments in which they live a lot every day to grow and gain the skills they need.” In RQ1, teachers were already expressing their view of the environment as a third teacher.

Enacting teaching philosophies. The 12 teachers came from eight different toddler programs. Each program followed the state's DOE guidelines for early care and education. For those programs receiving federal funding, programs also followed federal guidelines. The philosophies represented by programs in this study are Creative Curriculum, Montessori, Reggio Emilia, and Waldorf. Following are representative comments from participants.

Participant T8, who works at a Montessori program stated, “It is important for the environment to be beautiful, safe, and to develop a peaceful atmosphere in the classroom.”

Participant T12 works in a Montessori program. She said, "I like to help toddlers with self-regulatory skills." She elaborated on her comment by adding information about how she prepares the environment, "I have created a calm-down space in one corner of the indoor classroom to help my students with self-regulatory skills, or if a child just needs to get away from it all for a moment or two."

Participant T3 works at a Head Start program that follows a Reggio Emilia philosophy. She stated: "For me, the children are the environment! So, I have to know each of them individually; know what skill level they are at and what I want them to get to; follow their cues and interests; and prepare the environment from this knowledge." This participant also mentioned that the prepared environment includes both the indoor and outdoor inclusive spaces where she can observe children and assess them holistically.

Participant T5 works at a center that follows the Waldorf philosophy. She shared that the prepared environment needs to be child-friendly. She stated, "The environment should be safe for him to be able to explore." Participant T5 was also concerned with a developmentally and culturally appropriate environment.

Participant T11, who works in a program she called "Reggio inspired," stated, "The child is the curriculum so therefore the environment is planned around the child."

Participant T4 works at a center that follows the Creative Curriculum philosophy, which is based on several developmental theories. She shared that the prepared environment should support children's learning through play and should encouraged home-school relationships for children to feel safe and comfortable. She stated that in the environment "there's a comfort to the consistency of having designated spaces for

materials that they are familiar with and certain transitions happening when they expect them to. It creates the same kind of foundation of safety that a mother creates for an infant.” Participant T4 emphasized the importance of an environment being predictable so the child can explore and grow, adapt, and learn through his senses.

Observing and assessing children in the environment. Each toddler teacher responded that they believed that the prepared environment needs specific areas that promote independence and exploration, and create challenges. Teachers expressed their perspectives that the environment encourages activities that will create intrinsic rewards. These toddler teachers responded in the interviews that observation is essential to creating environments and curriculums that will support toddlers’ learning and optimum development. Interview responses included responses that the toddler environment has to be organized in order to promote independence, internal order, and consistency. Teachers also suggested that children's developmental needs, their personalities, their families and communities, their cultures, their languages, and their ways of learning all need to be taken into consideration while planning for toddler education.

Participant T7 stated that she likes to observe her students to create and adapt her environment and curriculum. She said, “When toddler teachers are planning their curriculums, they need observe to be able to identify the children’s interests.” Participant T12 stated, "It is necessary to observe children’s ways. For example, make sure you are including small groups -- avoiding all the children to come at the same time. Maybe some children do not feel comfortable sitting closer to other children. Maybe they are not ready

for large groups. Teachers need to individualized for those children's needs when you are planning your curriculum.”

Supporting children's developmental milestones. All participants' responses stated information about the importance of the environment to promote children developmental needs. Interviews reflected toddler teachers' perspectives that children's physical, social, emotional, and cognitive milestones are reached and supported by an intentionally planned environment as a third teacher.

Participant T13 commented that children learn from the environment and that creating a space that is warm, safe, and designed for their own unique personalities. Participant T1 stated, “The environment sets the stage for the child to be successful in what he needs to be at this time developmentally. We provide experiences that promote all children developmental domains.” Participant T7 stated, “ Toddler teachers need to make sure that you are meeting all the children's developmental needs with the appropriate challenge level -- not too easy or too difficult.”

Results: Research Question 2

In this section, I present results for RQ2: What are toddler teachers' perspectives of the concept of environment as a third teacher as a component of a a toddler program curriculum that promotes optimum growth and development of toddlers? Toddler teachers seemed to fully understand the question and there were no discrepancies in information evident during the interview process.

During analysis of RQ2, five common themes were found: (a) preparing the environment as a third teacher, (b) enacting teaching philosophies, (c) observing and

assessing children in the environment, (d) adapting environments to support all children in meeting developmental milestones, and (e) building relationships with children, families, and communities. In this section, responses that integrated themes were combined under dual headings, as follows: preparing the environment/enacting teaching philosophies; observing and assessing children in the environment/supporting children developmental needs; and building relationships with children, families, and communities.

Preparing the environment/Enacting teaching philosophies. Based on interview responses of teachers from different toddler programs varied. For instance, toddler teachers from programs that follow the Reggio Emilia philosophy, knew exactly where the term “environment as third teacher” originated. Teachers expressed that the Reggio Emilia philosophy promotes teacher’s consideration of the environment as the third teacher. In doing so, teachers indicated that they treat the environment as the vehicle that promotes children's critical thinking skills, inquiry, wonder, and investigation. When the environment is prepared using the lens of the third teacher, teachers are sensitive to aspects of adaptability, explorability, observability, and predictability. Following these subthemes, teachers stressed that places and spaces for toddlers must be safe, orderly, clean, and functional so that children may be able to adapt, explore, observe, and predict.

Participants T1, T6, and T11 responded much in the same way. Each suggested that the environment as the third teacher is based on the relationship between children, teachers, and classroom environment. This relationship promotes independence, flexibility, and focus on collaborative small groups and projects. Participant T6 stated,

“The environment as a third teacher means it is a functional and intentional learning space.” Participant T11 expressed, “In this environment, the children are the creators of their own learning.” Participant T7 stated, “It needs to be set up so that the teacher can use that classroom as her aide.” This participant spoke about the environment as, literally, having the presence of a third teacher in the classroom. For example, T7 continued, “The environment should supply safety such as baby gates, secure doorknobs, etc....because that is what your third teacher does in the classroom. This teacher looks for safety in the classroom.”

Observing and assessing children in the environment/Supporting children's developmental domains. In general, interview data from all 12 toddler teachers reflected they believe that observations are imperative while preparing the environment and creating the curriculum. For example, participant T4 suggested that teachers should start with a simple set up of the environment with basic areas for exploring, feeding, keep shelves with manipulatives and materials to the minimum, and creating a simple, predictable routine for the first few days of school. The teachers suggested the reason is to give the toddler teacher the chance to observe children during the first week of school to have an idea about what has to be added or changed based on the children's needs.

T4 said, "The reason for this [following a simple routine with few materials for the first weeks] is because we will spend the coming months getting to know the children, and learning what their needs and temperaments are. If teachers provide cluttering shelves with work, it will be overstimulating for some children.”

Participant T9 said, “Baseline curriculum/preparation is work you know is appropriate for the age group, while the future adjustment is all based on what you observe from your students as individuals and the classroom as a whole.” Participant T9 believed observing and assessment of needs are important in preparing the environment as a third teacher. Participant T10's perspective was that the environment is the biggest teacher “especially given how a child in the early years of development sort of takes on the environment as an extension of themselves.” Participant T2 stated, “It’s why it’s so important! The space truly reflects them and their needs.”

Building relationships with children, families, and communities. Participants' interviews reflected their perspectives that open communication with families is an essential tool while they are creating a learning environment for toddlers. Parents are viewed by participants as the most important resources for toddler teachers while they are trying to learn the children's personalities, cultures, and ways of learning. They considered the parents as the first teachers of their children.

Participant T2 commented, “That authentic relationship is essential to the child’s understanding of his world and those in it.” This participant's perspective is that the only way to build relationships with children and families is by creating relationships among the all adults who surround the child, including current and former teachers.

Participant T8 said, “Several of my parents have mentioned that their child is unusually calm and orderly while in my environment, but they are completely uncontrollable while in the home setting.” This participant further commented that she utilizes this relationship with parents to help them create an effective toddler environment

at home. From the parent's conversation, the toddler teacher realized the parent needed to provide consistency and order at home. She continued, “As I work with mainly at risk children and families, my classroom environment can give a child the ability and guidance to either work effectively, or add to their stress and chaotic life styles.”

Results: Research Question 3

In this section, I present toddler teachers' responses to RQ3: What is the toddler teachers' perspectives on the types of resources and supports they need to implement a prepared environment as a component of toddler program curriculum? While analyzing the data, I noticed three of the themes were emphasized, such as: (a) enacting teaching philosophies, (b) observing and assessing children in the environment, and (c) building relationships with children, families, and communities. These themes are presented below. All participants gave ample and descriptive responses while answering the questions and prompts. No discrepant cases were present during the study.

Enacting teaching philosophies. The 12 participants gave ample responses about different resources they use and how the resources support their delivery of the curriculum. Some of the teachers use the different assessments provide by the state's department of education, such as Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale (FCCERS), Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP), Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ), and from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) website and books. Some participants mentioned using their own observations and anecdotal records on children in their classrooms to prepare their environments and curriculums. Other participants commented that they follow primary

caregiving and value other early childhood teachers' inputs, and believe early intervention specialists and therapists are essential resources for toddler teachers and children.

Participant T6 stated, "I love ASQ, but also use FCCERS, and DRDP." "I use the above resources to make sure the appropriate material is out for the children to grow and develop in the areas they need and assure the environment is safe and has a meaningful purpose. Participant T2 commented, "I feel as though primary caregiving is one of the most important resources and supports for toddler development." Toddlers will frequently return to their caregiver for praise and close contact for reassurance, before heading off again for another fun experience."

Observing and assessing children in the environment/Building relationships with children, families, and communities. All toddler teachers said that they rely on the children's families as resources, especially parents' input while they are getting to know their students. In addition, the importance of observation of the children, how they behave with their families and other children, and how they interact with the environment were expressed by teachers during the interview.

Participant T11 shared, "We use family input as our first resource. We do this by continuously having conversations with the families on what the child's interest is at home. We use the child's family culture to support his/her curriculum. We do this with every child by having the family fill out an intake form that is reviewed between the teacher and the family during orientation. It includes how best to meet the child's individual needs, strength, and areas needing growth in family values."

Participant T1 stated that she was able to help one of her students that has a difficult time engaging with the work and lessons in the classroom. She talked about using anecdotal records taken during her observations while the child was at school. She reviewed her journal about the child and reflected on her records and information given by his parents. She said, “After working with the family and closely observing this “sweet bundle,” I had an idea. I added lots of heavy work into my environment. It was as if angels appeared that morning!”

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Specific protocols were followed during the processes of recruiting volunteers, obtaining participants, conducting interviews, collecting data, managing data, conducting member checks, analyzing data, and interpreting results. This study included trustworthiness and the main factors found in qualitative studies, including credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. I showed trustworthiness and authenticity to participants by communicating the intentions of the study in comprehensible language and ensured participants of credibility and confidentiality.

Credibility

To ensure credibility and to avoid bias while conducting the interviews, I asked the same questions and used the same language with all the participants by following an interview protocol. All participants were fluent in English. Each participant had an anonymous identity during the interview process. I ensured credibility by returning to the audio tapes and transcripts several times for accuracy and by keeping a record of responses from qualitative interviews. I also encouraged participants to complete member

checks after I transcribed and summarized their responses, which were followed up via e-mail.

Transferability

The sample size for the study was too small to achieve transferability of findings. However, data collected represented the collection and analysis of these 12 toddler teachers' perspectives.

Dependability

I assured dependability of the study's data by asking participants to read summaries of their interview transcripts to ensure accuracy of the data. Participants reported that I had captured their interview responses accurately. I also kept an audit trail of my data collection and data analysis by using participants' alphanumeric coded folders, interview questions, notes, quotes, journal entries, and transcripts.

Confirmability

Based on the qualitative interviews, the conceptual framework, and RQs, the study data and resulting findings showed confirmability and objectivity coming from the teachers' perspectives. All responses came from 12 toddler teachers from eight different education programs and philosophies. I kept a personal reflective journal that included quotes from participants, themes, subthemes, color coded words, and summary statements present during the data analysis. The findings aligned with the RQs. My journal notes helped me look back during the process to monitor my consistency and progression through the data.

Summary

The purpose of this basic qualitative study with interviews was to explore teachers' perspectives on the prepared environment as a component of a toddler program curriculum. Using in-depth interviews via telephone, my reflective journal, and follow-up e-mails, I was able to explore teachers' perspectives and gain deeper understandings about how toddler teachers continuously design their indoor and outdoor environments as part of their ongoing curriculum. The qualitative methodology approach made it possible for me to explore toddler program teachers' perspective in depth. Twelve toddler teachers from eight different programs were reported in this chapter. After transcribing the participants' interviews, I coded data and five main themes emerged, as follows: (a) enacting developmentally appropriate and culturally sensitive teaching philosophies, (b) preparing the environment as a third teacher, (c) observing and assessing children in the environment, (d) adapting environments to support all children in meeting developmental milestones, and (e) building relationships with children, families, and communities. These five themes became patterns in data for each RQ. Analysis of data, which became themes and patterns from this study, answered the three RQs. Themes and patterns provided organization of sections that address, discuss, and answered RQ1, RQ2, and RQ3.

In answering RQ1 of the study, teacher's responses indicated that toddlers operate in their prepared indoor and outdoor environments with confidence and independence as they meet their developmental milestones. Teachers observed and assessed how toddlers interacted with various aspects of prepared indoor and outdoor environments, and

discussed how they took observational anecdotal records and more formal assessments to plan their curriculum. Teachers suggested that when the environment is prepared with safety in mind, the environment promotes toddlers learning within all developmental domains and especially about self-care practices, languages, and social skills through exploration and play.

In answering RQ2, participants expressed their understandings about the concept of environment as the third teacher, which participants felt was important to be able to observe and assess children in an environment that is safe, adaptable, explorable, observable, predictable, and ready to be used by children. They agreed that they were able to support children's needs in an environment created as the third teacher.

Participants suggested that the concept of environment as third teacher is prepared to be a functional and intentional learning space that is inclusive and welcomes children and their families. The environment as third teacher lets toddlers know what to do in the spaces, whether indoor or outdoor, with little direction from the toddler teacher.

Participants described the environment as third teacher as the flexibility of the environment and the existence of "adapting to change routine" based on the children's needs. Teachers viewed the child as the actor in his own play. All toddler teachers expressed that from a prepared environment as the third teacher, that children learn there is predictability and that toddlers can anticipate, cooperate, and participate depending upon their individual developmental stages.

In answering RQ3, participants talked about specific assessments, philosophies, and questionnaires typically used in a toddler programs, such as the state's DOE and or

federal programs, as their main resources. Participants expressed the importance of relationships with children, families, and communities as important resources.

Participants' responses focused on their beliefs that toddlers need trust, safety, and healthy relationships to learn. Continuity of care, consistency among the adults preparing the indoor and outdoor environments as part of the curriculum were among resources. In Chapter 5, I discuss the findings of this study, its limitations, recommendations, implications for positive social change, and conclusions of this study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to identify toddler teachers' perspectives on the prepared environment as a component of toddler program curriculum. This study addressed the gap in the research related to a lack of knowledge about teachers' perspectives on the prepared environment as a component of toddler program curriculum (see Chazan-Cohen et al., 2017; Kuh & Rivard, 2014). I sought to answer three RQs in this study:

RQ1: What are toddler teachers' perspectives on a prepared environment as a component of a toddler program curriculum that will promote optimum growth and development of toddlers?

RQ2: What are toddler teachers' perspectives on the concept of environment as a third teacher as a component of a toddler program curriculum that will promote optimum growth and development of toddlers?

RQ3: What are toddler teachers' perspectives on the types of resources and supports they need to implement a prepared environment as a component of toddler program curriculum?

For data collection, I interviewed 12 teachers from eight different toddler programs by telephone with a follow-up e-mail. Each participant responded to six open-ended interview questions about the prepared environment as a component of a toddler program curriculum. I determined that following a basic qualitative study methodological paradigm with interviews supported my role as researcher. The intention for collecting data was to use individual face-to-face semistructured interviews to explore the

perspectives of teachers from eight different toddler programs. However, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Walden IRB granted approval for researchers to conduct these interviews via e-mail and telephone calls.

Conducting this basic qualitative study with interviews allowed me to explore teachers' perspectives to gain a better understanding of the importance of the prepared environment. In this study, I concentrated on the participating toddler teachers' perspectives about the prepared environment as a component of the toddler curriculum. The results identified from my analysis of the data from this study were based on 12 toddler teachers' experiences in the Southwestern region of the United States. In Chapter 2, I reviewed peer-reviewed journal articles highlighting researchers' findings about the concepts of a prepared environment and/or the environment as the third teacher. I sought to understand the benefits, influences, and effects on toddlers as they progress and met developmental domains. My review of peer-reviewed journal articles and reports published over the previous 5 years revealed that few studies have presented the importance of a prepared environment as a component of toddler curriculum (see Dalli & White, 2016; Kennedy & Lees, 2015; La Paro & Gloeckler, 2016). However, studies about the phenomenon have been recommended by researchers (Dalli & White, 2016; Hallam et al., 2016; Hoffman & Kuvalanka, 2019; Hooper & Hallam, 2017; Kennedy & Lees, 2015; La Paro & Gloeckler, 2016; Loeb, 2016; Price, 2018; Swartz & Easterbrooks, 2014). I found insufficient studies on toddler environments in group care. In Chapter 3, I summarized the methodology, research design, and data collection process followed in this qualitative study with interviews. In Chapter 4, I presented the study results from my

interviews with 12 toddler teachers and described the member checking process I used to ensure the accuracy of data collection. I assumed that the toddler teachers' responses exposed their perspectives in an honest, reflective, detailed, and concrete manner. Interviews with the 12 toddler program teachers provided thick rich data that described their perspectives and understandings about the prepared environment as a component of a toddler program curriculum. In Chapter 5, I further interpret the key findings of the study. In addition, I discuss the study's limitations, offer recommendations for further research, consider implications for positive social change, and offer a conclusion to the study.

Findings from interview data with 12 toddler program teachers revealed that teachers' knowledge of child development and theories learned during their teacher preparation programs and professional learning opportunities are resources that participants feel play important roles in positive outcomes for children. During the analysis of data, I found that toddler teachers in the study frequently mentioned their teaching philosophies and how they were able to enact their teaching philosophies while creating and preparing indoor and outdoor environments for toddlers as part of designing a toddler program curriculum. Participants found their professional learning opportunities and teacher preparation programs to be among the important resources that supported their work. Participants expressed how important available resources were for them to expand their knowledge, understanding, and skills related to toddler care and education. Many were able to continue professional learning or college courses while teaching toddlers and setting up indoor and outdoor environments.

Based on the analyses and interpretations of results of my study, toddler teachers were consistent in revealing information about their perspectives on a prepared environment. Participants suggested that intentionally preparing toddler environments based on children's interests, needs, and developmental milestones, is an important part of their roles as toddler teachers. They expressed their perspectives that the environment is just as important as another teacher in the classroom and, therefore, is part of and contributes to the curriculum.

Interpretation of the Findings

In this section, I reflect on my key findings in relation to the literature from Chapter 2 and the conceptual framework that was a basis for this study. Findings from this research both confirm and extend knowledge about the prepared environment as a component of a toddler program curriculum, as suggested by the theories of Montessori (1949) and Malaguzzi (1993). Data revealed that participating teachers are purposeful and thoughtful regarding the environment as part of toddler program curriculum in the following ways: (a) enacting developmentally appropriate and culturally sensitive teaching philosophies as they prepare the environment, (b) preparing the environment as a third teacher, (c) observing and assessing children in the environment, (d) adapting environments to support all children in meeting developmental milestones, and (e) building relationships with children, families, and communities. These five themes were repeated in patterns throughout the data. I was able to answer the three RQs and give recommendations based on my findings that are shared in a later section of Chapter 5.

Enacting Developmentally Appropriate/Culturally Sensitive Teaching Philosophies

Toddler teachers in the study stated that their own professional learning and education should be continuous in order to develop a successful toddler environment. Participating toddler teachers' perspectives about the importance of resources varied and were based on their teaching philosophies, as well as reflected the different a toddler programs in which they work. Even though they had studied and had experiences working in programs with different philosophies, all participants' interview responses reflected their agreement that they needed to have a foundation in child and human development. Based on their education in different philosophies, participants commented that a prepared environment needs to promote children's critical thinking skills, inquiry, wonder, and exploration as discussed by Kuh (2014), Malaguzzi, (1987, 1993), and Montessori (1949). Therefore, findings suggest that toddler teachers have the responsibility to teach and promote those skills through the prepared environment they design for their toddler students. According to Gehl and Bohlander (2018) and McDonald (2018), the environment mirrors teachers' intentions to support toddlers' learning and development. If toddler teachers commit to continuing their professional development in toddler education, they will be able to recognize what changes and challenges the environment has to promote to support toddler developmental milestones (Landry et al., 2014).

Teachers interviewed for the study revealed that they followed four different education philosophies. The philosophies brought to the study were the following: Montessori philosophy, Reggio Emilia (Malaguzzi), Waldorf philosophy, and Creative

Curriculum. All of these different philosophies and approaches have expressed the importance of the prepared environment and how beneficial the space could be to lead development and toddler learning (Araujo, Dormal & Shady, 2018; Epstein & Schweinhart, 2018; Gullickson et al., 2018; Malaguzzi, 1993, Montessori, 1949; Sutherland & Mukadam, 2018; Wittshire, 2018; Wilson, 2017). The difference in education philosophies did not revealed big differences in toddler teachers' perspectives about the importance of teacher preparation to help children learn and develop. Further, regardless of the participants' philosophical differences, all 12 participants commented that toddlers could develop optimally if they are free to explore. According to Edwards and Gandini (2018) teachers believe that their classroom should provide a structured yet flexible environment to accommodate toddlers' individual needs, as well as to create a peaceful and respectful atmosphere. Toddler teachers expressed their responsibility for promoting a sense of peace and harmony in child-centered classrooms (see Biermier, 2015; see Edwards & Gandini, 2018). Teachers following the Creative Curriculum, implemented child-centered classrooms based on several developmental theories and philosophies; these teachers shared that their professional training and textbooks by Dodge, Colker, and Heroman (2002) are resources which are central to their work.

Several participants expressed that assessments and rating scales in toddler education are essential resources and tools, especially while creating a prepared environment and toddler curriculum. The use of ASQ (Ages and Stages Questionnaire), FCCERS (Family Childcare Environment Rating Scale), DRDP (Desired Results for Developmental Profile) ITERS (Infant/Toddler Environmental Rating Scale), PITC and

PARS (Program for Infant/Toddler Care), CLASS (Classroom Assessment Scoring System), NAEYC (National Association for the Education of Young Children) and others were mentioned by the participants. All of these assessment resources are useful guides for toddler professionals when they are creating their classroom environments, lessons, and curriculum. Teachers reported that assessments and rating scales are resources that support toddler teachers as they choose appropriate learning materials for their classrooms. In summary, participants commented that many of the resources and supports needed to help toddler's meet their developmental milestones are found in the environment itself.

Supporting All Children in Meeting Developmental Milestones

According to toddler teachers, toddlers are in a challenging developmental stage (Chazan-Cohen et al., 2017). Teachers reported that toddlers are learning how to walk, talk, socialize, and explore and the environment needs to provide these things for them (Kovack & De Ros-Voseles, 2015). Based on the study results and responses from the toddler teachers, I found that the prepared environment should meet and support the needs of all children in the classroom. The prepared environment provides toddlers with material that will present challenges in their development. The prepared environment needs to be adapted and modified based on children's needs in meeting their developmental milestones that typically occur during the toddlerhood stage, such as: self-care practices, language development, exploration, social skills, and object permanence (see Kuh & Rivard, 2014; see Lillard & Jessen, 2008). Toddler teachers emphasized the need to take into consideration children's developmental needs while creating, adapting,

and modifying lesson plans for the toddler curriculum. Teachers confirmed that lesson plans in toddler curriculum need to promote exploration and manipulation of materials which was recognized in the findings of Bussey and Hill (2017), Kuh and Rivard (2014), and Lillard and Jessen (2008).

According to the participants, the prepared environment needs to promote order, consistency, and repetition to promote toddler's optimal development, which confirms the writings of Cross (2018) and Gopnik (2017). Findings from data revealed the importance of safety in the environment, which includes toddlers having a consistent environment where toddlers learn predictability. An extension of this was participants reports that the prepared environment provided routines that contribute to the toddlers' internal order development. This followed the work of Biermier (2015), Cross (2018), Gopnik (2017), and Lillard and Jensen (2008) who all suggested that children develop a sense of ownership of their environment and predictability and moderate challenge are appropriate. The prepared environment supports toddlers' participation and cooperation in the environment within their developmental milestones (see Chazan-Cohen et al., 2017). It is important for toddler teachers to provide their students with an environment that is set up for their needs, one that respects their developmental milestones, and that will help them to build the necessary skills to move forward in life (see Lippard, Riley & Hughes-Belding, 2016; see Price, 2018).

Observing and Assessing Children in the Environment

According to the participants, toddlers learn about consistency, place, aesthetics, respect, and care for space; also, organization, memory, and adaptability for the

environment (see Chazan-Cohen et al., 2017). Teachers concluded that it is important to keep in mind the children's needs while preparing indoor and outdoor environments.

Teachers concluded that outdoor spaces work as an extension of the indoor classroom spaces (see Gehl & Bohlander, 2018; see Mc Donald, 2018). Teachers all mentioned that if an environment is set up with respect for the children, children will in return learn how to respect their space and will come to expand the idea of respecting a space when they enter other places that do not belong to them (see Price, 2018).

Preparing the Environment as a Third Teacher

Teachers in this study highlighted how important the environmental features are when setting up a prepared environment. These features include various aspects as follows: lighting, natural colors, child-sized furniture, safety, and displayed of children work (see Hoffman & Kovalanka, 2019; see Knauf, 2018; see Price, 2018). Toddler teachers mentioned the importance of natural lighting and soft colored walls to minimized sensory overload in the children (see Price, 2018). They mentioned that if the color of the walls and the lights in the classroom are bright, the children get distracted and will not be able to focus on the learning materials or activities. For example, they observed that when they used natural lightening from windows or small accent lamps, a calm atmosphere in the classroom was created. According to Hoffman and Kovalanka (2019) and Price (2019) toddler teachers' challenges are often related to sensory overload for children; this must be considered while preparing the environments.

Toddler teachers recommended specific areas in the classroom are set up to promote developmentally appropriate learning. These recommendations included quiet

areas that promoted toddlers' interest in being read to and their use of books for book handling and reading, and quiet times; a feeding area; a large motor-skills area where children can climb or jump; manipulatives or work area where children develop small motor skills; art areas; science activity areas; and more. These areas are prepared with safety in mind and are accessible to children. All furniture is child-sized and everything in the classroom has a specific place, which creates order and comfort and promotes children's independence, internal order, and exploration (see Araujo et al., 2018; see Boag-Munroeg, 2015; see Cassidy et al., 2017; see Price, 2018). Toddler teachers also considered the importance of displaying children's drawings or other expressive works in the classroom in an uncluttered manner. Teachers discussed their views that toddlers will develop a sense of ownership, object permanence, and confidence in their abilities upon seeing their work displayed (see Careyn & Jones, 2016; see Corso, 2018; see Knauf, 2018; see Marrus et al., 2017; see Price, 2018).

Participants mentioned that teachers need to practice their lessons before they add new activities and materials to the curriculum. They explained that just because an idea is portrayed in a picture, it does not mean it is necessarily appropriate for their specific environments; or that it is functional for the developmental needs of children at that point in time. A few participants indicated that this information and practices stemmed from their teacher preparation programs.

According to Corso (2018), all children learn and see things differently. In addition, participants suggested a toddler program curriculum needs to promote a lot of opportunities for toddlers to experience trial and error. These lessons should follow

children's interests, needs, and wants (see Horn et al., 2018). In summary, toddler teachers declared that the concept of the prepared environment occurs when they can find the proper balance between the children's developmental milestones and safety and aesthetics (see Conklin-Moore, 2017; see Cross, 2018; see Kuh & Rivard, 2014; see Moran et al., 2017; see Price, 2018).

Building Relationships with Children, Families, and Communities

Toddler teachers expressed the importance of building partnerships and bonding relationships with children, and children's families (see Corso, 2018). Teachers expressed their belief that children seemed to be more comfortable around them and in the environment after teachers and parents have had daily interactions. When children see that open communication occurs between teachers and caregivers and their families, it gives children an added sense of safety and develops consistency in their lives (see Corso, 2018; see Swartz & Easterbrooks, 2014). Participants also mentioned that when adults act as role models, toddlers imitate their behaviors, which is why toddler teachers pointed out the importance of having consistent messages shared in the prepared environment, the curriculum, and with children's families. In order to send a consistent message to the children, there has to be a culture of healthy relationships among all. For example, toddler teachers also added that in order for the children to behave appropriately in the prepared environment, the adults in the toddler lives need to model the desired behaviors (see Chazan-Cohen et al., 2017). A participant who has been working with toddlers for 19 years mentioned, "If the teacher is loud the children will speak loudly; if the teacher has fast movements while she walks in the classroom; the children will follow

and run in the classroom.” As suggested by Carey and Jones (2016), Corso (2018), and Price (2018), children imitate their teachers and parents and that imitation will help them learn. In summary, participants commented that toddlers learn the foundations of life while experiencing the connection of respectful relationships (see Casey & Jones, 2016). Participants emphasized that the more years they have spent as a toddler teacher, the more they learned how to value the families’ input and treasure their bonding relationships.

The results of this study were analyzed and interpreted in the context of the conceptual framework that found teachers’ intentions were to prepare the environment as a third teacher where toddlers would have freedom to explore and reach their optimum development in all domains of learning. Montessori and Malaguzzi theorized about the prepared environment and these 12 toddler teachers confirmed their beliefs in the importance of designing and preparing an environment to promote toddlers’ competencies, critical thinking skills, and independence. According to participants, in a prepared environment, children will become an active factor in their own learning and development.

Limitations of the Study

The number of teachers interviewed was limited to 12 participants as part of eight different toddler programs that followed 4 different education philosophies. The research was limited to the teachers who volunteered to participate. Therefore, the different teachers’ perspectives were limited as well. The geographic area was also limited to the west side of the country, specifically on the Southwestern of the United

States. In addition, toddler teachers needed to have 3 or more years of experience working in the toddler environment as a criteria requirement to participate in the study.

The data collection process was challenging because I intended to conduct interviews in person to 12 toddler teachers however, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the IRB granted approval for researchers to conduct these interviews via e-mail and telephone calls. Some participants were available immediately, while others had some challenging times to respond promptly to my phone call and email. At the end all 12 participants were able to answer the interview questions.

As a veteran toddler teacher, a potential of bias opinions from my part could have been a limitation. However, I was very careful when I was conducting the phone call interviews and creating the interview questions, of not showing my opinions and perspectives to manipulate the information provided to the participants. I kept accuracy of their responses by transcribing all of the participants' responses to a journal and also, send it to them in an email for them to do member check as credibility of information in the study.

Recommendations

As a researcher, I felt the need to explore teachers' perspectives of the prepared environment as an important component of a toddler program curriculum. After analyzing data of the study, I recognize toddler teachers' perspectives that children will learn and develop optimally when they are in a supportive, inviting, and beautiful environment prepared for them. This study took place in a suburban area of the Southwestern US, where teachers have been prepared in toddler education and have

received ongoing professional learning opportunities as teaching professionals. Therefore, I recommend that further studies about the prepared environments as a component of a toddler program curriculum be conducted throughout the world with diverse groups of teachers. Although teachers were employed as toddler teachers in eight different settings, and the settings followed 4 different philosophies or theories, this current study did not compare these differences. Therefore, I recommend that research investigating teachers' perspectives of the prepared environment based on different a toddler program philosophies and theories be considered in the future.

I conducted this study with 12 experienced toddler teachers from eight different settings representing 4 toddler program philosophies. Teachers' perspectives have the potential to provide insights that will help other toddler professionals understand the importance of supportive relationships and the links between the prepared environment and toddlers' learning and development. All participants shared perspectives and practices that they follow in their own prepared environments with their students, the families of students, and their communities. Recommendations made are based on findings in this study and do not exceed study boundaries.

Implications

This study addresses a gap in the research on practice related to the importance of a prepared environment as a component of a toddler program curriculum. Findings from this study have the potential to contribute to positive social change in toddler curriculum development and implementation in group care. This knowledge may potentially influence decision-making by toddler program administrators to place emphasis on the

prepared indoor and outdoor environments. Findings may potentially influence decision-making by toddler program administrators to invest in resources that promote prepared environments.

Conclusion

The purpose of my research was to investigate, report, and supply with data the results of my study regarding the importance of the prepared environment as a component of a toddler program curriculum. Based on data collected in semistructured interviews about toddler teachers' perspectives, the concept of an environment as a third teacher was supported. The environment is prepared out of respect for the children it serves, which is in keeping with the conceptual framework and the theory of Malaguzzi in particular. Based on findings of this study, the prepared environment is a component of a toddler program curriculum that is supported by teachers in group care. The prepared environment gives toddlers opportunities to meet their developmental milestones as they develop independence and life skills which they will carry forward.

Findings from this study revealed that toddler teachers' perspectives on the prepared environment as part of toddler program curriculum are found in these five themes, as follows: (a) enacting developmentally appropriate and culturally sensitive teaching philosophies, (b) preparing the environment as a third teacher, (c) observing and assessing children in the environment, (d) adapting environments to support all children in meeting developmental milestones, and (e) building relationships with children, families, and communities. Based on my analysis and interpretations of the data obtained from semistructured interviews, I found that teachers believe that when toddlers are

encouraged to follow their inner guides in the environment, toddlers know no boundaries to learning as was suggested by Dalli and White (2016). Toddler teachers communicated that the prepared environment teaches the children that they are important, capable, and loved, which is supported by the conceptual framework and the theories of Montessori and Malaguzzi. The toddler curriculum is work that the toddler teachers identified as appropriate for this age group when it is ongoing, adaptive, and responsive to the toddler's development. Curriculum adjustments are based on their observations of toddlers as individuals and the classroom as a whole. An appropriately and aesthetically prepared environment with safety as a primary motivator is made evident and recognize by how organically and confidently children operate within it.

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Appendix A: Letter of Cooperation to the Director

Date:

Dear School/Center Director:

My name is Maria Varela. I am enrolled at Walden University in the Richard W. Riley College of Education to pursue a doctoral degree (Ed.D.) in Early Childhood Education and Leadership. As a requirement of degree completion, I will be conducting a basic qualitative study with interviews to explore toddler teachers' perspectives on the prepared environment as a component of a toddler program curriculum. The working title of my dissertation is "Teachers Perspectives on the Prepared Environment as a Component of Toddler Curriculum."

I would value the support from your Center/School to complete this research with toddler teachers from your program. I consider toddler education a topic that is sometimes overlooked by education stakeholders; which is one reason I am interested in having a focus on toddler education and bringing attention to the importance of toddler education. To conduct the study, I need to individually interview toddler teachers with three years or more years of experience in toddler care and education, in a mutually agreed upon location that will protect their identity and maintain confidentiality. I would like for teachers in your program to have the opportunity to volunteer to participate in interviews after school hours. Therefore, I am asking for your permission to facilitate me their e-mail addresses to send them an invitation letter and a consent form. Also, I am asking for your support in conducting interviews with the toddler teachers in your program. The length of the interviews will be approximately 30 to 45 minutes. Results of

the study will be sent to the program directly in care of the director. Volunteers participation is confidential and a toddler programs, programs locations, and the names of all participants in the study, will be deidentified in the dissertation. The study is voluntary, there is no compensation for participation, and participants are free to withdraw from the study at any time.

Thank you in advance for your consideration. Please do not hesitate to ask questions or raise your concerns about the research. I can be reached by e-mail or phone.

Thanks in advance,

Maria Varela

Doctoral Candidate

Appendix B: Interview Protocol/Questions to Toddler Teachers/Script

Date:

Address:

Dear Toddler Teacher:

Welcome and thank you for volunteering to participate in this research study. My name is Maria Varela. I am enrolled at Walden University in the Richard W. Riley College of Education to pursue a Doctoral Degree (EdD) in Early Childhood Education and Leadership. As a requirement of degree completion, I will be conducting a basic qualitative study with interviews to help me arrive at a project that will help me to explore toddler teachers' perspectives on the prepared environment as a component of a toddler program curriculum. The working title of my dissertation is Teachers Perspectives on the Prepared Environment as a Component of Toddler Curriculum.

I will like to know your perspectives about this topic through your responses of 6 face-to-face, open-ended questions about toddler education. The interviews will not take longer than 30 to 45 minutes, and it will take place in a public location (location to be discussed). The interview questions are the following:

1. Please define the term "prepared environment" in your own words.
2. Please talk about how you include the environment when planning your curriculums?
3. Please describe the environment as the "third teacher" in your own words.
4. Please discuss what toddlers learn from the environment?

5. Please tell me about types of resources and supports you feel are important to support toddlers' optimal development.
6. Please give me examples of how you include resources and supports in your curriculum.

All of your answers will be kept strictly confidential as well as your identities. I will need your permission to record your responses with a digital tape recorder. I will transcribe your responses and you will have an opportunity to review the responses and confirm or contest the accuracy of the transcript summary. This process is completely voluntary and withdrawing from the process will not have any impact at the school or program that you work. Please contact me if you have any questions or need more information about the study.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Maria Varela

Doctoral Candidate

Email: redacted

Appendix C: Content Expert Request Letter

Date:

Address:

Institution:

Dear:

My name is Maria Varela. I am enrolled at Walden University in the Richard W. Riley College of Education to pursue a Doctoral Degree (EdD) in Early Childhood Education and Leadership. As a requirement of degree completion, I will be conducting a basic qualitative study with interviews to help me arrive at a project that will help me to explore toddler teachers' perspectives on the prepared environment as a component of a toddler program curriculum. The working title of my dissertation is Teachers Perspectives on the Prepared Environment as a Component of Toddler Curriculum.

I am soliciting your assistant as an expert in the subject and as a juror to support the validity of the questions that I will be using as a data collector for this qualitative study with interviews. I will appreciate your input and consideration to revise of any potential psychological risks in the interview questions. I am inviting toddler teachers from different programs who have worked with toddlers and in toddler environments. I will be asking them 6 questions about the prepared environment and toddler curriculum.

Sincerely,

Maria Varela

Doctoral Candidate

Email: redacted