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Connection Between Early Childhood Teachers' Beliefs and Practices Regarding Play

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2014

Abstract

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

Research indicates play contributes to children's learning and development. The passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) changed early care and education by limiting time for play in early childhood classrooms. There is a gap in the literature concerning early childhood teachers' current beliefs about play and how those beliefs are connected to their practices. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine the connections between early childhood teachers' beliefs regarding play and their practices in the early childhood classroom. Lave's situated learning theory formed the conceptual framework for this study recognizing the early childhood classroom and the social aspect of learning as a community of practice. Data for the study were collected through structured interviews, observations, and documents from teachers in 6 early childhood classrooms. Coding was used to identify patterns and themes. Analysis revealed that teachers held strong positive beliefs in regard to play. Teachers believed the connection between their beliefs and practices regarding play was strong and the connection between them was clear. Evidence showed the connection was not as strong and clear as teachers perceived. A clearer understanding of the link between teachers' beliefs and practices could create positive social change and benefit teachers, parents, administrators, and children. Teachers may use the information in this study to reflect on and make changes to their practices. Program directors, principals and school districts may be guided to implement curriculum changes more inclusive of play, or to include play and play theory in preservice training. These changes could bring the United States more in line with top performing countries in terms of educational outcomes for children.

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Dedication

   To Dick, my wonderful husband, partner, and friend, what I have accomplished here seems small compared to the challenges you have faced. You have met each and every one of those challenges with courage and grace. Your strength has been an inspiration, and I could not have done this without your love and support. I dedicate this dissertation to you. Thank you.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Opportunity for meaningful play used to be a staple in early childhood classrooms and in children's lives. Research indicates play makes important contributions to children's learning and development (Erikson, 1977; Ginsburg, 2007; Pellegrini, Dupuis, & Smith, 2007; Piaget, 1969; Vygotsky, 1978). Research from the 1970s indicated that teachers perceived play to be a significant teaching and learning paradigm (Keating, Fabian, Jordan, Mavers, & Roberts, 2000). Play was highly regarded and many early childhood educational approaches held play at the core of early childhood classroom activities (Bodrova, 2008; Keating et al., 2000; Patte, 2010; Samuelsson & Carlson, 2008). Much has changed in the field of early care and education since the 1970s.

The passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) raised accountability in education and mandated children achieve proficiency in specific academic skills and standards in the domains of reading, writing, math, and science by third grade (NCLB, 2002). Many of these changes negatively affected play in early childhood classrooms. "Many educational settings across America are altering, reducing, or eliminating time devoted to play due in part to increasing accountability for student performance on standardized tests as required by NCLB" (Patte, 2010, p. 1). It is common in schools, even in early years for children to have fully scheduled days with little in the way of break time or play time (Ranz-Smith, 2007). Children are spending more of their time

sitting and attending to lessons in early childhood classrooms (Panksepp, 2007). This reduces the time available for play.

Another way that play has declined has to do with a lack of teachers' use of play as an instructional strategy or teaching practice. There appears to be a lack of understanding in early education settings regarding the ability for play to be used as an instructional strategy (Ranz-Smith, 2007). Teachers are implementing more direct instruction in their practices (Ranz-Smith, 2007). The teaching of academic tasks in regimented ways has replaced natural play in early childhood classrooms (Panksepp, 2007). This has devalued play and the role of play in the classroom (Patte, 2010). Findings from numerous studies illustrated the contribution play makes to the learning and development of young children (Bergen, 2009; Ginsburg, 2007; Miller & Almon, 2009; Milteer & Ginsburg, 2012; Nicopoloulou, 2010; Panksepp, 2007; Pellegrini et al., 2007).

It is possible that the social and political landscape has changed early childhood teachers' current beliefs regarding play as a teaching and learning paradigm. It is possible that early childhood teachers still hold play in high regard, but that they no longer feel they have time to include very much of it as part of the classroom experience. It is possible that these changes are having an influence on the role of play in the classroom. There are many factors that support or limit children's play. Some important factors are the key individuals in the lives and experiences of young children, the early childhood, or preschool and kindergarten, teachers. There is a gap in the literature where teachers' dispositions on play are concerned (Dako-Gyeke, 2011; Tekin & Tekin, 2007).

Though many studies have been done prior to NCLB, what is not clear is how early childhood teachers perceive play today, and how teachers' current perceptions impact the role of play in early childhood classrooms and curriculum. If there is a lack of connection between what teachers believe about play and what is practiced in the classroom, it is possible that children are not getting enough opportunity for play in their early childhood experience, which could negatively impact their readiness for kindergarten in the physical, cognitive, language, social, and emotional domains (Vu, Han, & Buell, 2012). Moreover, when children enter kindergarten and they are not ready for the experience, more tax dollars are needed to support their education.

Through the review of literature in Chapter 2 several important themes emerged. An increased interest in early care and education has raised public awareness regarding early learning. The development of publicly funded initiatives targeting pre-K designed to address school readiness has raised concerns regarding outcomes and accountability (Barnett, Lamy, & Jung, 2005; Curby et al., 2005; Howes et al., 2007). The result is that play, and activities like play, are being replaced with more academic content (Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, & Gryfe, 2008). In addition to creating stress for the child, a lack of play and increased focus on academics and cognitive skills may hamper both children's development and academic progress (Frost, 2007; Ginsburg, 2007; Heckman, 2011; Patte, 2010; Wood, 2007). Early childhood teachers struggle with the demands of supporting readiness, producing outcomes and academic gains, and supporting what is best for young children (Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Sheridan, 2007; Stephen, 2010; Tuzo, 2007). Though teachers may believe in and value play, there continues to be a sharp

decline in play in early childhood classrooms, suggesting a lack of connection between teachers' beliefs and practices (Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Sherwood & Reifel, 2010).

The research will be addressed in further detail in Chapter 2. Using the research cited as a guide, this study addressed this gap in the literature and provided an opportunity to gain a further understanding of early childhood teachers' dispositions toward play. Though teachers clearly favored play in the 1970s, a myriad of factors impact the lack of play seen in early childhood classrooms today (Bodrova, 2008; Keating et al., 2000; Panksepp, 2007; Patte, 2010; Ranz-Smith, 2007; Samuelsson & Carlson, 2008; Schroder, 2007). This qualitative case study examined teachers' perceptions and beliefs in order to gain a clearer perspective on the current role of play in the early childhood classroom. The results of this study may be used to communicate with educators and perhaps help restore play as an integral part of early education.

Background

Play is disappearing in children's home lives and in early childhood classrooms in favor of more academic pursuits for young children. Current research indicated play in early care and education has fallen out of favor (Almon, 2003; Almon & Miller, 2009; Milteer & Almon, 2012; Oliver & Klugman, 2008). This trend is not something new. Trends in early care and education research show there have been times when play has been viewed as a key experience to support children's learning and times when academics have played a larger role (Elkind, 2007). The current research shows a trend in moving away from play (Miller & Almon, 2006; Miller & Almon, 2009; Oliver & Klugman, 2007).

What is different about play being replaced by academics now is that the stakes are much higher. With high-stakes testing in third grade, educators are pressured to begin getting children ready for testing earlier and earlier (Oliver & Klugman, 2008; Ranz-Smith, 2007; Schroder, 2007). Though current research indicated children's lives are becoming more and more structured with less and less opportunity for play, and that a lack of play is harmful to young children's development, there is no indication that the pendulum is getting ready to swing back the other way. There are several reasons for this.

Early educators and parents each play a role in shaping the trends in early care and education programs. Early care and education is a market-driven system (Goffin, 2007; Guolin, 2008; Morrissey, Lekies, & Moncrieff, 2007). If the consumer, in this case the parent, is asking for programs to get children ready for kindergarten by focusing more on academics, that request will have a strong influence on what happens in early childhood classrooms (Schroder, 2007). Early childhood teachers may acquiesce to parent demands.

In spite of parents' demands, teachers are bound by ethics to uphold what is considered best practice in the field. Yet pressure from parents is not the only pressure driving teachers' choices. An additional pressure the teachers of young children face is the need to comply with program or curriculum guidelines handed down to them by directors, principals, or school districts. What is not known is how these variables play out in early childhood classrooms. These pressures and demands may take precedence over an individual teacher's preference or beliefs.

Perhaps teachers of young children do still believe in the importance of play, and embrace it as an important part of their teaching practices. Numerous studies beginning in the 1970s indicated play was an important paradigm of learning and an important part of practices in early childhood classrooms (Bodrova, 2008; Keating et al., 2000; Samuelsson & Carlson, 2008). In the decades since these original studies, many changes have occurred in the world of early childhood that affected teaching practices.

The initiation of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) added pressure to include academics in early childhood curriculum. Many studies have indicated that academics are currently an important focus in preschool curriculum (Brown & Mowry, 2009; Oliver & Klugman, 2008; Panksepp, 2007; Ranz-Smith, 2007; Schroder, 2007; Stipek, 2006). Research conducted within the past 5 years shows play makes important contributions to children's learning and development; however, few studies have been addressed teachers directly, asking about their beliefs regarding play and how this trend toward academics in early childhood programs has affected teachers' practices and their ability to implement play in the classroom (Fisher et al., 2008).

A lack of play in the lives of young children can have a significant impact on their learning and development. Every aspect of child development, including physical, cognitive, language, social, and emotional, is supported by the child's engagement in play (Brown, 2007; Ginsburg 2007). Play is a primary process critical to young children's development (Ginsburg, 2007; Panksepp, 2007). A lack of play limits creativity (Anistasiadou, 2008), impedes healthy brain development (Panksepp, 2007; Pellegrini et al., 2007), hinders the development of higher level thought processes (Russ & Schafer,

2006), can lead to obesity (Frost, 2007), and inhibits children in learning how to share, negotiate, and develop problem solving skills (Ginsburg, 2007). The timing of the decline in play appears to coincide with significant changes in educational policy.

Recent changes in legislation and education related initiatives at the national level are requiring an alignment of early learning standards in preschool and academic standards in kindergarten (Brown & Mowry, 2009; Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2006). This has contributed significantly to the lack of play in early childhood classrooms and in children's lives (Anastasiadou, 2008; Ginsburg, 2007; Schroder, 2007). Since the advent of NCLB, the focus on academic tasks in early childhood classrooms has decreased the opportunity for play in early childhood classrooms by 12 hours per week (Ackerman & Barnet, 2005; Wesley & Buyssee, 2003). Recent research indicates this trend continues, but does not offer statistics (Cakirer & Garcia, 2010; Nicopoloulou, 2010; Patte, 2010; Wenner, 2009).

Prior research showed that children's learning and development suffer when play is not part of their everyday experiences (Erikson, 1975; Ginsburg, 2007; Panksepp, 2007; Ranz-Smith, 2007). It is difficult for human beings to reach their potential as adults if their development and creativity has been undeveloped or under developed as children (Miller & Almon, 2009). Children entering school today will encounter a workforce as adults that centers on creativity and innovation (Bergen, 2009; Bybee & Fuchs, 2006). The success of the United States as a global competitor depends on this creative innovative workforce (Bybee & Fuchs, 2006). When these initiatives are not developed through play in childhood, children are less ready for the experience of school

(Miller &Almon, 2006), and will be less ready for their experiences in the adult workforce (Bybee & Fuchs, 2006). According to Heckman (2011), one of the greatest economic burdens to a society is an underdeveloped workforce.

A lack of play in early childhood classrooms not only impacts children and the school system, but it also has the potential to impact the future economic sustainability of our country (Bergen, 2009; Bybee & Fuchs, 2006; Heckman, 2011). In order to bring about change it is important to understand what teachers' current beliefs are about play. There is a gap in the literature regarding what is known about teachers' beliefs and the connection those beliefs have to their teaching practices.

The Problem

A trend toward more academics in curriculum since the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) mandating children achieve proficiency in specific academic skills and standards by third grade has limited the time for play in early childhood classrooms (Brown & Mowry, 2009; Oliver & Klugman, 2008; Panksepp, 2007; Ranz-Smith, 2007; Schroder, 2007; Stipek, 2006). This has put pressure on teachers to change instructional strategies creating a movement toward direct instruction (Oliver & Klugman, 2008; Ranz-Smith, 2007; Schroder, 2007). The decline in play created by this movement may mean that children are entering public school without the resources and the developmental foundation gained from play needed to be successful in school (Erikson, 1975; Ginsburg, 2007; Milteer & Ginsburg, 2012; Panksepp, 2007; Ranz-Smith, 2007). More services and tax dollars could be needed to support them (Miller & Almon, 2009; Miller & Almon 2006; Oliver & Klugman, 2007). This lack of play in early childhood classrooms not

only impacts children and the school system, but it also has the potential to impact the future economic sustainability of our country if our education system fails to produce a creative innovative workforce (Bergen, 2009; Bybee & Fuchs, 2006; Heckman, 2011). There is a gap in the current literature regarding whether there is a connection between the lack of play and play-based curriculum in early childhood classrooms to teachers' beliefs regarding play. This qualitative case study helped create an understanding of the relationship teachers' dispositions toward play and play-based curriculum in early childhood classrooms has to teaching practices and curriculum choices within those classrooms.

The Purpose

The goal and purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore six early childhood teachers' dispositions toward play through individual, structured interviews with early childhood teachers of 3, 4, and 5-year-old children, classroom observation of teachers, and document analysis. The goal was to better understand the relationship between teachers' beliefs in play and teaching practices, curriculum choices relating to formal/didactic instruction, child-centered practices, play-based curriculum, and readiness. The phenomena central to this study were teachers' beliefs, play, formal/didactic instruction, child-centered practices, play-based curriculum, and readiness. Further definitions of these terms appear in a later section. An analysis of the results identified patterns and themes related to teachers' beliefs that can be presented to the early childhood community to support the importance of play in early childhood classrooms.

Conceptual Framework

Maxwell (2005) described a conceptual framework as a way to communicate the researcher's point of view, identify the setting and subjects being studied, and summarize the literature and prior research that frames the study. This framework provides the reader with an understanding of the issues and the people involved in the study. Miles and Huberman (1994) described a conceptual framework as a way to explain the main things to be studied: "the key factors, concepts, or variables [of the study], and the presumed relationships among them" (p. 18). The conceptual framework lays out the theory that supports and informs the research (Maxwell, 2005). Using this lens, the situated learning theory was chosen to frame this doctoral study.

Within the framework of situated learning theory, learning happens during activity within the context of the culture it occurs or is situated in (Lave, 1988). In this study the early childhood classroom becomes the context for the learning and the children and teacher(s) within the classroom create the culture of the classroom. The main activity for learning considered in this study is play and teacher beliefs regarding play in connection to teaching practices. Play is a central experience in the lives of young children. Play and learning are integrally connected for children, especially young children (Howard & Hill, 2006; Russ & Schafer, 2006). As children play, learning occurs; this relationship between play and learning is so seamless that children do not even recognize that learning is occurring, yet play as a teaching practice appears to be on the decline in early childhood classrooms (Howard & Hill, 2006; Miller & Almon, 2009).

Play is an important part of the culture of childhood and the lives of children (Min & Lee, 2006). Children learn through the context of their play. There is thus an opportunity for teachers in early childhood classrooms to use play to shape children's learning. The teachers and children in the classroom form a *community of practice* where teachers and children are learning together. The connection between play and learning and teaching is one of the over-arching concepts of this study, and examining it in the context of the early childhood classroom as a community fits the framework of situated learning theory.

Situated Learning Theory

The social context of learning and social interaction among and between learners are important aspects of situated learning theory. The social engagement of the learners and the teacher, in this case through the experience play, with each other and within the learning context, in this case the early childhood classroom, are what create the main community of practice considered in this study. The view of the early childhood classroom as a community of practice is what clearly connects it to Lave's (1988) situated learning theory.

Situated learning, according to Lave (1988), occurs as the function of an activity (the activities in this study are play and teaching practices), and the context and culture in which that activity is situated (the early childhood classroom). Situated learning theory grew from Lave's work as a social anthropologist. Lave noted the importance of the social construct of learning and how people in groups acquire knowledge. Lave's situated learning theory posited that learning is social and can come from the experience

of participating in daily life, not as an isolated process. Knowledge is constructed with others, and this environment recognizes that learners enter the environment with knowledge, experiences, and their own personal identities.

Situated learning theory pairs well with the beliefs of Vygotsky (1978), who suggested that human knowledge develops during and within the context of activity. Vygotsky's work will be explored further in the literature review. Knowledge and the construction of knowledge is a dynamic interactive process (Hause, 2008; Lave, 1988; Vygotsky, 1978). This interactive process illustrates another aspect of situated learning theory: learning evolves as a result of membership in a group (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The learner learns and develops because of participation in and membership of that group. Lave and Wenger (1991) labeled these groups *communities of practice*.

A community of practice, as defined by Lave and Wegner (1991), is a group of people involved in a process of collective learning. Communities of practice are found in many settings both formal and informal and were first identified through study of meat cutters, tailors, and midwives (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Lave and Wenger identified key components of communities of practice: community, identity, practice, and learning and meaning. These components work together and support each other. A true community of practice would not exist without all of these elements. These elements will be further described in the literature review.

The educational setting focused on in this study was early care and education, to include preschool and kindergarten classrooms. Early care and education play an important role in the development of young children, and they are seen more and more as

an essential part of preparing children for their kindergarten experience (Ackerman &

Barnett, 2005; Barnett et al., 2005; Bergen, 2009; Howes et al., 2007; La Paro et al.,

2005; Lara-Cinasomo, Fouling, Daugherty, Howes, & Karoly, 2009; Miller &Almon,

2009;). Children who enter kindergarten without a preschool experience where play is

valued are often identified as being behind their peers in terms of readiness and social

skills (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005; Barnett, 2008; Barnett & Belfield, 2006; Curby et al.,

2005; Lara-Cinasomo et al., 2009; Long, Bergeron, Doyle, & Gordon, 2005). It is

important to note that educators and parents form the community of practice for

educating young children, yet it is the teacher and children together who form the

community of practice in the classroom. In this study, I examined a community of

practice (the early childhood classroom) within a larger community of practice (early

childhood educators, administrators, parents, and stakeholders). It is necessary to

consider each of these as a separate community of practice because teaching does not

happen in a vacuum. Though teachers are often alone in their classrooms they are still a

part of the larger community and culture of the school or the program they teach in,

which in turn is a community of practice in and of itself. The teachers in the study are

members of both the community of their school and the community of their classroom.

Their practices as teachers are influenced by each community.

When individuals are members of more than one community, expectations or

beliefs in one community may conflict with those of another community. This can be a

source of conflict because the individual must decide which identity they will offer to

those outside the community. For example, at the core of this study are early childhood

teacher beliefs. It is natural for teachers to want to be viewed by others as experts in their field and to be using endorsed teaching methods and practices in the classroom. If the trend in research illustrates a movement away from play and toward the inclusion of more academics in the preschool classroom, it is possible this movement is at the core of a lack of connection between teacher beliefs and practices. If teachers are aware of this trend and are modifying their practices to stay current in the field, this modification may place individual teacher beliefs in conflict with their practices in the classroom.

At the core of situated learning theory are the components of community, practice, identity, and learning and meaning. The early childhood classroom is an appropriate setting for application of this framework. It is the context in which early childhood teachers' everyday practices are embedded. As teachers practice their beliefs, learning and growth continue within their classroom, within the community of their school or program, and within the larger socio-political community. The literature review will further examine the components of community, practice, identity, and learning and meaning in the larger community, with early childhood teachers as core members, and in the community of the early childhood classroom, where the members are both teachers and children. Teachers are learning from their engagement and involvement with children.

Nature of the Study

This qualitative case study of multiple cases in multiple systems offers various perspectives on the issue being studied. Though participants' experiences and perspectives collected through interviews, artifacts, and document analysis, the study

explored the relationship that teachers' beliefs in play have on teaching practices, instructional models, and curriculum choices in early childhood classrooms. According to Yin (1984), a case study investigates a "contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence is used" (p. 23). This case study interpreted the phenomenon of play and the meaning being given to it by participants.

A case study will provide an understanding of the correlation of the factors involved and an in-depth way to explore the various aspects of teachers' beliefs about play. An understanding of teachers' beliefs about play and in what ways their beliefs affect their curriculum and teaching practices may offer further insight into the phenomenon of a current lack of play in early childhood classrooms.

Creswell (2007) offered several characteristics for case studies. These characteristics align with this study in the following ways. Through an in-depth study of this topic, multiple sources of data—teacher curriculum plans, daily schedules, observations of teachers, as well as interviews with early childhood teachers—can be examined. A case study offers a place for the perspectives of the participants in the study. The case study can isolate one particular population. A case study can also provide a holistic view of play from an early childhood teacher's standpoint.

A case study is the best approach for this topic of study for the following reasons. It is expected that there is a relationship between teachers' perceptions of play and choices of instructional models, teaching practices, and curriculum approaches, but exactly what that relationship is has not been predetermined. The open-ended aspect of

the case study allows the participants to influence the findings of the study (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 1984). The participants of the study were five early childhood teachers and one kindergarten teacher. The participants and environments influenced the themes of the study. The environments studied were each teacher's classroom. The data collection methods thus align with case study research (Creswell, 2007). Data were collected through interviews, document analysis, and classroom observation. I analyzed the data with the support of a physical system for managing data and the software NVivo. And finally, as part of the larger early childhood community, I brought the perspective of an early childhood teacher with a strong belief in play and a concern about the state of play that frame the study and analysis (Merriam, 2002).

Research Questions

The central research question of this study is this: How do early childhood teachers' beliefs about and disposition toward play connect with their practices in the classroom? The subquestions that follow this central question are:

1. What are teachers' current beliefs, perceptions, or dispositions toward play?

2. What influences shaped teachers' beliefs (training, mentor, parents)?

3. How are teachers' beliefs regarding play and teaching practices, instructional models, and curriculum choices used in the classroom related?

4. How do teachers perceive the role of play in early childhood classrooms?

Definitions

Academics: Activities in the classroom focused around skills, content, and concepts like literacy and mathematics that pertain of the formal testing beginning in third grade (Ackerman & Barnet, 2005; Wesley & Buyssee, 2003).

Child-centered practices: The action and work in the classroom that comes from the initiatives and interests of the child and that invites collaboration with peers and/or with a teacher (Pederson & Liu, 2003; Tzuo, 2007). The needs and experiences of children allow them to have a certain amount of freedom and control over the direction and content of the learning (Steinberg, Woodhouse, & Cowan, 2002; Tzuo, 2007). This involvement results in the learning being more meaningful to them (Pedersen & Liu, 2003).

Didactic/formal instruction: Target activity guided by the teacher stressing rote learning, often focused on an academic skill (Pui-Wah, 2010; Samuelsson, Byrne, Olson, Hulslander, Wadsworth, Corley, Willcutt, & DeFries, 2008).

Dispositions: How teachers are predisposed to act (Katz & Raths, 1985). Beliefs are what influence and drive these behaviors (Katz & Raths, 1985).

Instructional model: A context for teaching and learning that can involve space, equipment, and materials and that includes the organization of activities in relation to the structure of the day (Sheridan, 2007). It also includes pedagogy, the educational strategies used by the teacher, the attitude of the teacher, the process of how members of the classroom interact with each other, and the atmosphere of the classroom (Sheridan, 2007).

Play: An essential process (Myck-Wayne, 2010; Pellegrini et al., 2007). It is an enjoyable, creative, minimally scripted exploration, often without a defined ending, in which the participant is totally absorbed and engaged in the experience (Bergen, 2009; Myck- Wayne, 2010; Ortlieb, 2010; Pui-Wah, 2010). Play is not necessarily serious, but players are serious about it (Pui-Wah, 2010). Play can be either an individual or group experience (Ortlieb, 2010).

Play based curriculum: Learning experiences based on the child's interests that include the role of the teacher in connecting the play to concepts, and that involve teacher planning to support children in gaining content knowledge. It offers the possiblility for the social construction of knowledge (Edwards, Cutter-Mackenzie, 2011; Ortlieb, 2010).

Readiness: Readiness for school has to do with a combination of academic and non-academic skills and behaviors that children need to be successful in the environment of school (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005). Some of these skills and behaviors include: following directions, expressing thoughts and needs, respecting others, taking turns, not being disruptive, and possessing the social and emotional well-being to interact appropriately with peers and engage in the learning process (Ackerman, & Barnett, 2005; Lin, Lawrence, & Gorrell, 2003; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2006). Academic skills for readiness are related to numeracy concepts, language and literacy concepts, cognition, and general knowledge (United States National Educational Goals Panel, 1995).

Teachers' beliefs: Ideas, behaviors, and attitiudes influencing teaching philosophy, view of students, curriculum, and practices (Abu-Jaber, Al-Shwareb, & Ghieth, 2010; Cassidy, Buell, Pugh-Hoese, & Russell, 1995; Vartuli, 1999). There are

four categories that teachers beliefs fall within: relationship between philosophy and practices, self reported philiosophy and observed practices, association between teacher and principal philosophy, philosopy associated with child outcomes (Vartuli, 1999). Teachers' beliefs regarding instruction and curriculum tend to be aligned with one of two categories in support of cognitive skills (academic) or in support of non-cognitive skills (development of character traits like motivation, problem solving, and social emotional competence) (Heckman, 2011; Vartuli, 1999). Beliefs are formed through training and experience (Abu-Jaber et al., 2010).

Teacher practices: The actions and work of the teacher within the classroom that promote the growth and development of children across physical, cognitive, language, social, and emotional developmental domains (Brown, 2010; Wood & Bennett, 2000).

Assumptions

Within this study, several assumptions were made. The first assumption was that early childhood teachers would freely and thoughtfully provide honest information in the form of documents and answers to interview questions. The second assumption was that teachers would have some self-awareness regarding their practice. The third assumption was that the results of this study would provide a deeper understanding of how teachers' beliefs and perceptions shape the direction of the field of early care and education.

Scope and Delimitations

This qualitative case study explored and examined early childhood teachers' beliefs and perceptions regarding play. The study was conducted in six early childhood classrooms in New England. This provided a large enough pool for collecting rich data

but will delimit the study so it does not become too large. Teachers voluntarily

participated in the interview process and provided documents for analysis. Teachers

were selected based on either the quality of the program where they taught or the type of

program where they taught. Cases chosen for the study were selected on the basis that

they represent contemporary ideologies, are likely to have educated staff and high

program standards, and are likely to have a curriculum based on child development

(Samuelsson, Sheridan, & Williams, 2006). From a quality perspective, intervention

based models rank highest, public school based programs second, Head Start third, and

typical child care programs rank fourth but number among the programs that serve the

most children (Barnett & Belfield, 2006). Using the above selection criteria may make it

easier to generalize and transfer the results of this study. Participants of the study had a

credential relating to early childhood and at least 3 years of teaching experience.

Limitations

A limitation of the study is that it was conducted in a specific geographic area

with a small number of participants. This factor implies that the demographic of the

study could be homogenized. Another limitation of the study was that the small

population interviewed may make it difficult to generalize the results. A general

limitation of studies in the field of early childhood education is that there a lack of

standardization of licensing regulations, standards of quality, and practice consistent

across all states. Choosing cases using the selection criteria described in the previous

section that considered philosophy, education of staff, program standards and curriculum

addressed some of these limitations. Though the study was conducted in a specific

geographic area, these criteria could be applied universally, which could support the generalization of the results of the study.

Significance of Study

In addition to addressing a gap in the literature regarding a current understanding of teachers' beliefs and dispositions toward play, the information gained from the study provided important insights regarding how teachers' beliefs about play are connected to decisions teachers make about instructional practices. These insights could advance the knowledge in the field. This knowledge in turn could have implications for guiding policies and practices for preservice training for teachers.

Findings from the study may support positive social change in many ways. For example, results of this study offered a clearer understanding of the link between teachers' preferences and choices influencing classroom practices. This could influence individual teacher practices as teachers reflect on and make changes to their practices. The information presented in the study could be used to support meaningful discussions about the place of play in early care and education between members of the teaching community and between teachers and parents, which could contribute to a greater understanding about the benefits of play as a part of teaching practices and lead to changes in the implementation of curriculum that is more inclusive of play.

On a societal level practices and curriculum for preservice training for teachers may be changed to include play theory and implementation of play. On a global level these changes could bring the United States more in line with top-performing countries in the world in terms of educational outcomes for children. The analysis of current research

offered in the literature review illustrates both the important contribution play makes to

children's healthy development and the lack of play in early childhood classrooms.

Findings from the study may thus offer further insight regarding the phenomenon of a

lack of play in early childhood classrooms.

<div align="center">**Summary**</div>

This chapter provided both a background for and an introduction to the case study

of early childhood teachers' dispositions toward play. A brief overview of the influences

of both historical and current trends on the field of early care and education was

provided. The impact these trends have on the perception of play and use of play as an

instructional model were discussed and will be further explored in the Literature Review.

Chapter 1 also included a problem statement, research questions, the purpose of

the study, and a conceptual framework. The nature of the study, including the

methodology, definition of terms, assumptions, scope and delimitations, and limitations

of the study, were outlined but will be highlighted in more depth in Chapter 3.

The findings of the study may promote a positive social change in early childhood

education. Understanding and clarifying teachers' current beliefs and perceptions around

play will make it possible to see how well teachers' beliefs and perceptions regarding

play match up with current educational trends. This may promote bringing play back to

the forefront as a teaching practice, instructional strategy, and curriculum choice in early

childhood classrooms.

Chapter 2 will provide an overview and review of the literature. The ideas

presented in the background in Chapter 1 will be developed in further detail with

evidence from studies on play and learning, play in childhood, teachers' beliefs, instructional strategies, curriculum models, teaching practices, historical and current trends in early childhood education, and the impact of national policies on beliefs and practices. The conceptual framework will be discussed in further detail. A description of the gap in the literature and how this study fits into the current body of research will be offered. A detailed examination of the methodology will be provided in Chapter 3, including a description of the research design. The rationale for the use of a case study will be reviewed. The selection of participants, role of the researcher, data collection, threats to quality and the ethics of the study will also be discussed. Chapter 4 will present an in-depth description of the study, provide an analysis of the data, and offer a brief summary of the results. The discussion in Chapter 5 will interpret the findings, connect them with the literature review, and offer recommendations for the field of early care and education and suggestions for further study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Literature Review

Recent changes in legislation and education related initiatives at the national level have compromised the role of play in early childhood classrooms and in children's lives by creating   a focus on academic tasks at earlier grade levels, including early childhood classrooms (Anastasiadou, 2008; Brown & Mowry, 2009; Ginsburg, 2007; Schroder, 2007; Scott-Little et al., 2006). A focus on academic tasks in early childhood classrooms has decreased the opportunity for play in these classrooms by 12 hours per week (Ackerman & Barnet, 2005; Wesley & Buyssee, 2003). Prior research showed that children's learning and development are hampered when play is not part of their everyday experiences (Erikson, 1975; Ginsburg, 2007; Panksepp, 2007; Ranz-Smith, 2007). Current research illustrates that play in preschool continues to decline though statistical data is not included in this research, so it is not known whether the hours play is available to children have also continued to decline (Cakirer & Garcia, 2010; Nicopoloulou, 2010; Patte, 2010; Wenner, 2009).

When children's learning and development are not supported because of a lack of play, they enter school less ready for the experience (Miller &Almon, 2006; Miller & Almon, 2009). The lack of play impacts schools and school systems because when children enter school and they are not ready, more programs are needed to support them and more tax dollars are needed to implement those programs. Looking at the larger impact on society, this situation can lead to an underdeveloped workforce and may impact economic sustainability (Bybee & Fuchs, 2006; Heckman, 2011). Key early

childhood experiences, including play, are important in developing a future workforce

that centers on creativity and innovation, which is necessary for a strong economy

(Bergen, 2009; Bybee & Fuchs, 2006; Heckman, 2011; Miller & Almon, 2009).

There is little information in the literature regarding early childhood educators'

current beliefs regarding play and whether there is a connection between those beliefs

and the lack of play and play-based curriculum in early childhood classrooms. There is a

gap in the current literature concerning this topic. This qualitative case study explored

the phenomenon of teacher beliefs and may help create a better understanding of the

relationship between teachers' beliefs about play and play-based curriculum in early

childhood classrooms to the teaching practices and curriculum choices teachers make

within those classrooms.

The literature review will provide the reader with a further understanding of what

is known about teacher beliefs surrounding play and other influences on current teacher

practices in the field of early childhood. The literature review begins with a section on

situated learning theory which forms the conceptual framework for the study. The major

topics of the literature review include the sociopolitical community, which encompasses

society, public policy, culture, and socio-economic issues. The focus shifts to early

childhood teachers and their beliefs and dispositions. And, finally, the focus narrows to

the community of the early childhood classroom, including current and past patterns of

practice, and teachers' approach to, support of, and interactions with children. In

addition to a review of current research and literature, the contributions of seminal

theorists will be discussed. Vygotsky plays a particularly important role due to the strong

connection of his work to communities of practice, which is the core of the conceptual framework for the study. The literature review concludes with a summary and introduction to the next chapter.

Many online databases were used to conduct this literature review. Using Thoreau, Walden University's multiple data base search engine, the following data bases were searched: Academic Search Complete, Education Research Complete, ERIC, ProQuest, PsycARTICLES, PsychINFO, Science Direct, SocINDEX, and Teacher Reference Center. In addition, the database Sage was searched, and Elsevier was searched to access NAEYC Early Childhood Research Quarterly through Walden University. The libraries of Champlain College and the University of Vermont Library were searched online and physically for books and journals. All searches were supplemented with Google Scholar. The following keywords were used to conduct searches: *academics*, *attitudes, beliefs, children, childhood, child development, day care, didactic, direct instruction, disposition, early childhood, formal instruction, learning, perceptions, parents, play, policy, practice, preschool, teachers, teaching, and training.* Multiple combinations of key words and terms were also used to conduct searches, including, but not limited to: *early childhood*, and *early childhood teacher, teacher*, and *preschool teacher*, paired individually and in combination with *academics, attitudes, beliefs, child development, didactic, direct instruction, disposition, formal instruction, learning, perceptions, parents, play, policy, practice, teaching,* and *training. Children, childhood, child development, early childhood,* and *preschool* was paired individually with *academics, didactic, direct instruction, formal instruction, learning, parents, play,*

teachers, and *teaching. Parents* was paired individually and in combination with *academics, attitudes, beliefs, children, childhood, child development, day care, early childhood, formal instruction, learning, perceptions, play, policy, preschool, teachers,* and *teaching. Play* was paired individually and in combination with *academics, attitudes, beliefs, children, childhood, child development, day care, didactic, direct instruction, early childhood, formal instruction, learning, perceptions, policy,* and *preschool.*

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is based on the phenomenon of teacher beliefs regarding play in connection to teaching practices. Play is a central experience in the lives of young children. Play and learning are integrally connected for children, especially young children (Howard & Hill, 2006; Russ & Schafer, 2006). As children play, learning occurs; this relationship between play and learning is so seamless that children do not even recognize that learning is occurring, yet play as a teaching practice appears to be on the decline in early childhood classrooms (Howard & Hill, 2006; Miller & Almon, 2009).

Play is an important part of the culture of childhood and the lives of children (Min & Lee, 2006). Children learn through the context of their play. There is an opportunity for teachers in early childhood classrooms to use play to shape children's learning. The connection between play and learning and teaching is one of the over-arching concepts of this study and fits the framework of situated learning theory.

Situated Learning Theory

This kind of learning forms the foundation for Lave's (1988) situated learning theory. Situated learning, according to Lave (1988), occurs as the function of an activity (the activity in this study is teaching practices) and the context and culture in which that activity is situated (the early childhood classroom). Situated learning theory grew from Lave's (1988) work as a social anthropologist. Lave (1988) noted the importance of the social construct of learning and how people in groups acquire knowledge. Lave's (1988) situated learning theory posited that learning is social and can come from the experience of participating in daily life.

Learning, therefore, takes place within a real context and is not separated from the real world as an isolated process. Situated learning theory was originally used to describe the kind of learning that occurs in an apprentice type relationship when a novice or apprentice learned a craft or trade from a more experienced mentor (Lave, 1988). It stressed the importance of learning being a part of everyday activities to support the transfer of knowledge (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Knowledge is constructed with others, and this environment recognizes that learners enter the environment with knowledge, experiences, and their own personal identities.

Situated learning theory pairs well with the beliefs of Vygotsky (1978), who suggested that human knowledge develops during and within the context of activity. In regard to children's development in early childhood, play is the leading activity (Bodrova & Leong, 1995). Vygotsky's work will be explored further at a later point in the literature review. Knowledge and the construction of knowledge is a dynamic interactive process

(Hause, 2008; Lave, 1988; Vygotsky, 1978). This interactive process illustrates another aspect of situated learning theory: Learning evolves as a result of membership in a group (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The learner learns and develops because of participation and membership in that group. Lave and Wenger (1991) labeled these groups communities of practice.

Communities of practice. A community of practice, as defined by Lave and Wegner (1991), is a group of people involved in a process of collective learning. Communities of practice are found in many settings, both formal and informal, and were first identified through study of meat cutters, tailors, and midwives (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Lave and Wenger identified four key elements of communities of practice as the following: community, identity, practice, and learning and meaning. These components work together and support each other. A true community of practice would not exist without all of these elements.

The term *community* is used to identify a group of people who share the same profession or interest, a group of people in the same educational setting, or a group of people working together on a common cause (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Members interact, build relationships, and learn together, share information, experiences, and resources (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Membership and interaction can be formal or informal. The setting, too, can be formal or informal, as formal as the classroom or as informal as an Internet chat room.

As members engage in and participate in a community of practice, they develop an identity. It is possible to be a member of more than one community at a time; for

example, the subjects of this study are early childhood teachers. They are all members of

the community of the classroom they teach in and the program or school that classroom

resides in. They may also be residents, voters, and taxpayers of the school districts they

teach in, making them members of a larger, more informal, yet related community. It is

the teacher's role and identity in each community that bridges the two communities.

Identity. Identity can change as individuals move from community to

community. In one community an individual may be a newcomer, whereas in another

community the same individual may have been a long-time member. A member's

identity develops based on personal history and experiences. His or her identity within

the community hinges on this personal identity and what they bring to and can contribute

to their community (Lave, 1988). Individuals may participate in many communities at

any given time; for manageability of the study, the educational settings are the only

communities considered.

The educational setting focused on in this study is early care and education, to

include preschool and kindergarten classrooms. Early care and education plays an

important role in the development of young children and is seen more and more as an

essential part of preparing children for their kindergarten experience (Ackerman &

Barnett, 2005; Miller &Almon, 2009; Barnett et al., 2005; Bergen, 2009; Howes et al.,

2007; La Paro et al, 2005; Lara-Cinasomo et al., 2009). Children entering kindergarten

without the experiences gained from play are often identified as being behind their peers

in terms of readiness and social skills (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005; Barnett, 2008; Barnett

& Belfield, 2006; Curby et al., 2005; Lara-Cinasomo et al., 2009; Long et al., 2005). It is

important to note that educators and parents are part of the community of practice for educating young children, the still larger sociopolitical community, yet it is the teacher and children together who form the community of practice of the early childhood classroom. In this study, I will examine a community of practice, the early childhood classroom, within a larger community of practice, the sociopolitical community composed of early childhood educators, administrators, parents, and stakeholders. The teachers in the study are members of both communities.

When individuals are members of more than one community, there may be expectations or beliefs in one community that conflict with those of another community. This double membership can be a source of conflict in which individuals must decide which identity they will offer to those outside the community. For example, at the core of this study are early childhood teacher beliefs. It is natural for teachers to want to be viewed by others as experts in their field and to be using endorsed teaching methods and practices in the classroom. The trend in research illustrates a movement away from play and toward the inclusion of more academics in the preschool classroom; it is possible this conflict is at the core of a lack of connection between teacher beliefs and practices. This conflict of identity between one community and the other may place individual teachers' beliefs in conflict with their practices in the classroom.

Practice. Communities of practice may be differentiated by language, role identity, behaviors, values, beliefs, and assumptions (Lave & Wenger, 1991). These factors provide members with the idea of practices of a particular community and a framework for why the community does what it does. Through engaging in communities

of practice, people form relationships and develop an identity. These relationships form the basis for what happens within these communities. People and relationships are thus important considerations for this study.

The last major portion of the conceptual framework for this study is concerned with people and relationships. A logical conclusion of using this theory as a lens for this study is that the connection between play and learning, and between perceptions and beliefs of teachers, will form the basis for what happens in the community of practice of the classroom.

Meaning and learning. As members engage in their community of practice, they may initially observe and imitate the practices of other members. Members have to learn the practices of their community and understand the meaning of these practices within the community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). As their own personal identity as a member of that community forms, members learn and develop their own meaning. They may experiment with the practices of the community, adapt the practices, or even reject the practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Learning and making meaning is an everyday part of teacher practices.

Alignment of the Study with the Theory

At the core of situated learning theory are the components of community, practice, identity, and learning and meaning. The early childhood classroom is an appropriate setting in which to apply this framework. It is the context in which early childhood teachers' everyday practices are embedded. As teachers operationalize their beliefs in the classroom, their learning, and growth continue within the community of

their school or program, and within the larger socio-political community. The components of community, practice, identity, and learning and meaning will be discussed in the literature review with literature supporting each component.

The first section will include the larger sociopolitical community of early care and education. The second section will consider teachers as they are members of the larger sociopolitical community and members of the early childhood community. The third section will discuss the community of the early childhood classroom, where the members are both teachers and children. These components offer a way to examine teacher beliefs and practices within situated learning theory and the framework of what Lave and Wenger (1991) defined as a community of practice.

Sociopolitical Community

The first community considered in this review of literature is the sociopolitical community of early care and education. This community is shaped by public policy, the culture, and the current socioeconomic climate. The culture of the sociopolitical community has an impact on how early care and education is viewed within that community. This viewpoint can shape public policy and impact curriculum in early care and education as well, which can shape teacher beliefs and practices. Other countries have been successful in implementing a national curriculum in early care and education that reflects these aspects of their culture (Sheridan, 2007). National policy in Sweden, Germany, Norway, and Finland has played a role in developing an early childhood curriculum in these countries that hinges on the interests and needs of the children

(Sahlberg, 2011; Sheridan, 2007; Trageton, 2005). Norway and Finland's experience with the development of this type of initiative warrants closer examination.

In 1997 both Norway and Finland implemented a National Curriculum in which play figured prominently. In Norway, this curriculum spanned all lower primary grades (for children aged 6-10 years; Trageton, 2005). The framework of this curriculum is long running themes through which multiple subjects are taught at once and play is part of at least 2/3 of the experience. The framework for curriculum in Finland is not as clearly focused on play, but states that "all students be offered a fair chance to be successful and enjoy learning" (Sahlberg, 2011, p.22). In Norway, play is the subject that ranks fourth in importance behind Norwegian language, mathematics, and religion. During the first four years of school children spend almost 12% of their school day in play. According to Trageton (2005) leisure time both in and outside of school has increased over the last twelve years.

As the National Curriculum was implemented in Norway extra training for teachers was needed in the pedagogy of play (Trageton, 2005). Preschool teachers were paired with primary grade teachers and received training, primary grade teachers were not required to have training, but many of them voluntarily took training. Preservice training for teachers was reformed to include training on play. There was a lack of research and textbooks that were inclusive of play in primary grades.

It is typical for children in Norway to spend 50% to 60% of their time in preschool in play. Trageton (2005) suggested that providing teachers the opportunity to learn about and observe play is a good way to change teacher's attitudes about play. Sahlberg (2011)

described teacher's attitudes in Finland toward their profession and learning stating there

is an expectation that teachers will continue to learn and grow throughout their

professional life. Another important difference of teaching and teachers in Finland is that

teaching as a profession is revered and valued the way doctors are in the United States

(Sahlberg, 2011). Teachers in Finland teach an average of six hours a day; the rest of

their work time is devoted to curriculum planning, professional development, and school

improvement (Sahlberg, 2011). Teachers are given time each day to plan, learn, and

reflect with other teachers. There is a lot of competition for teaching spots. In Finland,

there were 6,600 applicants for 600 teaching spots in 2010; large numbers of applicants

for a limited number of spots is a typical trend (Sahlberg, 2011).

These countries have placed a priority on developing these educational initiatives.

They have also invested significant resources. There is statistical data to illustrate how

these investments are paying off. The Trends in International Mathematics and Science

Study collects international data every 5 years to determine how fourth and eighth grade

students are performing in math and science (International Association for the Evaluation

of Educational Achievement, 2012).

In 2003 Finland was in the top three countries for math and science scores in both

fourth and eighth grades. Finland does not appear in the 2007 study. Sweden, Norway,

and Germany do, though they ranked below the United States in both math and science

the statistical data shows that with exception of Sweden all of these countries student

performance as measured by test scores are trending up in fourth and eighth grade math.

The results of the 2011 were recently released and data shows Finland ranking in the top

5 in science scores and in the top 10 in math, above the United States on all counts. Finland is also a top performer in the 2009 IEA's International Civic and Citizenship Education Study testing eighth graders and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's Programne for International Student Assessment of 15 year olds (Sahlberg, 2011). The resources these countries placed on the implementation of these initiatives indicates the value these countries place on children and is reflective of the cultures of these countries and the development of their sociopolitical community.

Public policy, culture, and the socioeconomic climate are central to shaping the goals and providing the foundation for teaching and learning experiences. This aspect of the conceptual framework needs careful review, as well as supporting background information, because the sociopolitical community may play an important role in shaping teacher beliefs. In recent decades, socio-economic issues have changed the landscape of early care and education. In recent years, public policy has had an even greater impact. Public interest in the system of early care and education has generated some significant changes that will be detailed further.

The members of the sociopolitical community include policy makers, taxpayers and voters, administrators, teachers, and parents. All of these members play some sort of role within the sociopolitical community of early care and education and are part of shaping the modern system of early care and education. The modern system of early care and education in the United States began and has continued to develop since the Second World War.

Numerous types of early care and education programs ranging from private preschool, non-profit, to typical child care became more prevalent as more women entered the workforce. Research conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) showed the impact of the movement of women into the workforce that influenced a trend from parent care to out-of-home care (Weikart, 2000). Early care and education programs continue to experience a rapid growth that began in the 1960s (Barnett, 2008). According to Weikart (2000), continued employment of parents, particularly women, makes the reversal of this trend unlikely. Many parents perceived a need for education or social-emotional development of young children in readiness for school as other reasons for using out-of-home care (Weikart, 2000).

The public interest in pre-K programs and kindergarten readiness has caused an increase in both federal and state initiatives to support early childhood education. These initiatives include programs like Head Start, Early Head Start, pre-K special education, and funded pre-K. This trend in growth is expected to continue over the next decade (Curby et al., 2005). The research shows that economics and social issues, including inequity, can be positively affected with investments in early childhood programs.

Issues affected by early childhood investments include poverty, infant mortality, school truancy rates, dropout rates, and crime rates (Barnett, 2008; Barnett &Belfield, 2006; Freitas, Shelton, & Tudge, 2008; Ho, 2006; Kartal, 2007). Children from disadvantaged families are more prone to being involved in crime, becoming teenage parents, needing to utilize the welfare system, and more often report poor health (Barnett

&Belfield, 2006; Kartal, 2007). Long term studies on the Perry Preschool program for low income children show that every dollar spent yields a saving of up to $17 by the time the children served in those programs reach 40 years old (Freitas et al. 2008). These savings are based on reduced crime and on decreased spending on special education and welfare services. This research indicates advantages for governments in making investments in early care and education and in helping shape the practice of the sociopolitical community of early care and education.

Practice. The discussion in this section centers on practices put in place by members and stakeholders of the sociopolitical community that impact early care and education. High quality early care and education gives children a good start in life. Quality early childhood programs focus on physical, mental, emotional, and social development, which leads to better school performance, lower crime rates, and the "greater possibility for raising more socially harmonious people" (Kartal, 2007, p. 544). The other focuses of education are preparing one for labor by teaching certain foundational knowledge and skills, and preparing one to function socially as a member of society, though social functioning has usually taken second place to knowledge and skill development (Kartal, 2007). In spite of social functioning taking second place, early childhood education programs are important in other social contexts, as in social mobility.

Preschool education programs can enable disadvantaged children to achieve greater socio-economic status than their parents, increasing social mobility (Barnett & Belfield, 2006). Children living in poverty typically enter school an average of a year

behind children from middle-class families (Milteer & Ginsburg, 2012; Stipek, 2006). A

high quality preschool experience for children is one successful strategy in closing the

gap. Weikart (2000) offered evidence from research to show disadvantaged children

attending high quality early care and education programs entered school well prepared

socially and intellectually, leading to greater success in school. This greater success for

children in school led to greater success as children grew from adolescence and into

adulthood (Kartal, 2007; Freitas et al. 2008).

The increasing focus on early care and education programs to influence children's

learning, improve child outcomes, support children in later school success, and maintain

accountability prompted many states to implement and fund pre-K programs. The

development of these initiatives occurred to deal with the rising concern about the lack of

school readiness, especially for disadvantaged children (Barnett et al., 2005; Curby et al.,

2005; Howes et al., 2007). The challenge for policy makers in developing initiatives and

spending public dollars is measuring outcomes and providing accountability. One of the

policies examining both of these issues that has affected both early care and education

and the K-12 education system is the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

The purpose of NCLB was to "ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and

significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education" (House Committee on

Education and the Workforce, 2001). This federal legislation outlined how improving the

quality of schools, focused curriculum on literacy, mathematics, science, and history,

improving the quality of teacher training and preparation will positively impact student

outcomes. This would be evidenced through testing and assessment. Though the

majority of the legislation focused on the K-12 system, early care and education is considered.

There are several sections and parts of NCLB (2001) dealing with early care and education. Many of those sections made provisions for specialized groups of young children from marginalized populations: migratory children, children at-risk of abuse and neglect, limited English proficient and immigrant children, Native American and Puerto Rican children, Alaska Native children, and Native Hawaiian children. Subpart 2 of NCLB dealt with Early Reading First. This part of NCLB has implications for all early childhood programs with emphasis on children from low-income families.

Early Reading First outlined provisions for supporting language, literacy, and pre-reading development of preschool age children. This program includes providing high quality language and literature-rich environments, with language and literacy activities based on letter recognition, phonemic awareness, oral vocabulary and comprehension, and conventions of print. NCLB (2001) further stated that preschool children should be assessed. Section 5542 of NCLB is titled the Promotion of School Readiness through Early Childhood Emotional and Social Development and is a section of subpart 14, Grants to Improve the Mental Health of Children.

In this section of NCLB (2001), readiness is not focused on academics and academic learning for preschool. The approach to readiness presented focuses on emotional, behavioral, and social development. In addition to these areas of development, the approach highlights the importance of including parents. It includes a recommendation of this approach to preschool education for children with two of ten

identified risk factors ranging from abuse and neglect to low birth weight. This seems to indicate that the pursuit of a curriculum focused on social and emotional development in early childhood only supersedes an academic curriculum if children have special needs or are disadvantaged in some way. This perspective seems to have had an influence on the shift in practices of early childhood teachers as pressure is felt earlier and earlier regarding the testing that begins in third grade**.**

The high stakes testing related to the mandates of NCLB begins in third grade (Brown & Mowry, 2009). One result of this timing is that curriculum is being pushed down through the earlier grade levels. This is where the pressure to begin work on academic skills at an early age seems to stem from. Starting on academic skills earlier is supposed to help children be ready for the testing in third grade. This pressure is now felt in preschools. This change has served to bring about a closer examination of issues impacting effectiveness and quality: increased training for early educators, clearly defined early childhood curriculum, assessment, and increased program expectations regarding children's outcomes.

Meaning and learning. A closer examination of issues like play and outcomes fall into the meaning and learning aspects of the sociopolitical community. Since the passage of the NCLB in 2002 a sharper decline in play has occurred, with play being reduced or even eliminated from early childhood classrooms (Pate, 2010; Sherwood & Reifel, 2010). Over 40,000 schools in the United States have either reduced or eliminated play (Frost, 2006; Murano, 2008; Patte, 2010). The high stakes testing situation in third grade created by NCLB measures the success or failure of schools. Vu

et al. (2012) stated, "Programs that decrease play unknowingly decrease the likelihood that children will be successful academically" (p. 208). To offer children the optimum benefit of play as a learning pedagogy, it takes a skilled teacher to facilitate the play (Vu et al., 2012). There are inappropriate expectations of young children's academic achievement at younger and younger ages (Vu et al., 2012). This changed expectation has resulted in extreme views and a tremendous amount of pressure on early care and education.

There is also tremendous pressure on the children. According to Frost (2006), children are "wetting their pants, crying, acting out, becoming depressed, and taking their parent's pills" to help them cope with testing (p. 226). In preschool, where there used to be story time and art, there is now preparation for tests and drilling skills (Frost, 2006). Including more academics at a younger age in an early childhood curriculum means that other activities, like play, that have been traditionally connected to preschool are devalued, undermined, and have to give way (Bodrova, 2008; Patte, 2010). In the 1980s, approximately 40% of a child's day in preschool was spent in play; today that figure is closer to 25% (Miller & Almon, 2009). The movement toward academics and accountability creates a climate where professionals in early care and education are put in the position of either defending play or reducing the time children spend in play to make more room for academics (Myck-Wayne, 2010). Both children and teachers are feeling pressure to perform.

The Teacher

The teacher is the member who spans the sociopolitical community of early care and education and the community of the early childhood classroom. Teacher beliefs, perceptions, dispositions, and practices may be shaped by the sociopolitical community of early care and education and in turn these shape the community of the early childhood classroom and what occurs within that community.

Teachers' beliefs and dispositions. In Chapter 1 a definition for teachers' beliefs was offered. For the purposes of this study, teachers' beliefs are defined by the ideas, behaviors, and attitiudes influencing teaching philosophy, view of students, and practices (Abu-Jaber et al., 2010; Borg, 2001; Cassidy et al., 1995; Richards, Gallo, & Renandya, 1991; Vartuli, 1999). These beliefs can come from a variety of sources and experiences. Teachers' beliefs can come from childhood experiences, family values, experiences in life, education, training, and experiences with children (Abu-Jaber et al., 2010; Raths, 2001; Wilcox-Herzog & Ward, 2004). Within these experiences, teachers' beliefs can be separated into two categories; professional beliefs that come from education, training, and professional development and informal beliefs based on childhood, life, and classroom experiences with children (Wang, Elicker, McMullen, & Mao, 2008).

The study of teachers' beliefs is complicated because they can include attitudes, values, judgements, opinions, perspectives, conceptions, personal theories, and perspectives (Pedersen & Liu, 2003). At the same time, the study of teachers' beliefs is important because current research indicates that teachers' beliefs shape what happens in

the classroom (Abu-Jaber et al., 2010). Teachers' beliefs shape the attitude and climate of the classroom and influence how teachers make decisions, support learning, and manage behavior (Borg, 2001). Studies show teachers' beliefs have a stronger influence on their practices than training, or practices of their colleagues (Abu-Jaber et al., 2010; McMullen et al., 2006). Many of these beliefs are deeply rooted, so deeply rooted they may be unconscious beliefs.

Unconscious beliefs are the most difficult to change because these are the beliefs and values held most tightly. When one of these central beliefs is changed, it can impact a person's entire belief system (Richards et al., 2001). It is important to study teachers' beliefs and perceptions because they can have significant impact on student outcomes (McMullen et al., 2006). Teachers make decisions for students around issues like grade levels, groupings in the classroom, curriculum, and special education needs based on their subjective view of students' abilities (Ready & Wright, 2011).

In other words, teachers' perceptions can have a significant impact on students' immediate and long term learning opportunities. Ready and Wright (2011) indicated that one possible bias may be due to differences in culture: Most elementary school teachers are white, middle-class women, while the student population tends to be more balanced in gender and ethnicity. Evidence suggests that teachers' perceptions may be biased against particular groups of students, like those in a lower socieoeconomic group, which can lead to inaccuracy in representing them (Ready & Wright, 2011).

Teacher perceptions may be the most closely related to student achievement in the kindergarten year. Ready and Wright (2011) found a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy

regarding teacher perceptions. If teachers believed a student would be high functioning then the student would rise to that belief. If teachers believed a student would perform poorly, the student met that expectation as well. Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) referred to this as the Pygmailion Effect, in recognition that a "person's expectations of another person's behavior can quite unwittingly become a more accurate prediction simply for its having been made" (p. vii).

The Pygmailion Effect showed that teacher preferences do indeed have an influence on child outcomes. Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) found that "teachers' attitudes and behaviors might be contributing factors to pupil failure" (p. 51). The reverse was also found to be true. If teachers looked at children with a halo effect and expected them to succeed and make academic gains, they did (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968, p. 98). A teacher's expectations of a child's behavior can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is possible if this is true in regard to a student's cognitive or academic abilities, the same may be true of teachers' beliefs and perceptions around curriculum and play. It is possible that teacher beliefs and perceptions regarding play may lead teachers to either over or under estimate the value of play.

Dispositions. The idea of dispositions was introduced by Katz and Raths (1985). The idea of dispositions rose from observing the actions of the teachers. If the actions become synonymous for dispositions, then Katz and Raths concluded that beliefs would be pre-dispositions and influence the actions of teachers in the classroom (1985). So in summary, dispositions focus on behavior, what teachers do, and how teachers act.

Beliefs are what influence and drive behavior and are focused on why teachers do what they do.

Connections between beliefs and behavior. Teachers struggle with the demands of producing outcomes and academic gains and wanting to support what is best for young children. Play and academic outcomes are viewed by many as mutually exclusive (Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Sheridan, 2007; Stephen, 2010; Tuzo, 2007). Though teachers may see value in play, the stronger focus on academics and academic gains has led to a decline in play in early childhood classrooms (Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Nicopoloulou, 2010; Sherwood & Reifel, 2010).

Research shows that beliefs and practices of teachers can be influenced and changed through professional development related training. It is, however, difficult to change core beliefs through these experiences (Korth, Sharp, & Culatta, 2010; Richards et al., 2002). The formative experience for the development of teachers' beliefs seems to be the practice of being mentored by experienced practicing teachers (Richards et al., 2002). This makes the study of current beliefs of experienced practicing teachers regarding play important.

One drawback is that practices developed through training using research and theory may be difficult to transfer into the classroom. A second drawback has to do with the fact that numerous studies conducted around teacher beliefs were conducted with preservice teachers (Applegate & Applegate, 2004; Cassidy et al., 1995; Katz & Raths, 1985; Sherwood & Reifel, 2010; Wood, & Bennett, 2000). Most of the research conducted on beliefs of practicing teachers is conducted in relation to a specific area of

teaching, such as beliefs regarding curriculum, literacy or math instruction, or beliefs regarding developmentally appropriate practice (Abu-Jabar et al., 2010; Hedge & Cassidy, 2009; Korth et al., 2010; McMullen et al., 2005). There are also many studies focused on general belief systems (Borg, 2001; Cassidy et al., 1995; Han, & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2010; Lara-Cinasomo et al., 2009; Pederson, Liu, 2003; Raths, 2001; Richards et al., 2001; Vartuli, 1999; Wang et al., 2008). In some of these studies, it is possible to tease out information about teachers' beliefs, dispositions, or perceptions regarding play.

There are only a small handful of studies that focused specifically on current teachers' beliefs, dispositions, or perceptions regarding play (Dako-Gyeke, 2011; Fisher, Hirsch-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2008; Howard, 2010**;** Leaupepe, 2010; Ranz-Smith, 2007; Tobin, & Kurban, 2010). These studies merit further discussion as this is the literature most closely connected with the recently completed study. The majority of the studies reviewed in this chapter pertaining directly to teacher beliefs used qualitative methods to collect data which lines up with the methods of the proposed study.

The primary qualitative methods used to collect data on teachers' beliefs regarding play were interviews and open ended surveys (Howard, 2010**;** Leaupepe, 2010; Ranz-Smith, 2007; Tobin & Kurban, 2010). This dissertation study also included interviews. Studies reviewed in this chapter on teachers' beliefs about DAP indicate future studies on teacher beliefs should include classroom observation of teachers and the perspective of the child (Abu-Jabar et al., 2010; Sheridan, 2007). According to McMullen et al. (2006), observing teachers in the classroom in future studies would be a way to better understand the connection between teachers' beliefs and practices. Though

this dissertation study did not include children it did follow the recommendations for future research to include classroom observation of teachers as a strategy for collecting qualitative data.

There were weaknesses in several of these studies reviewed that focused specifically on current teachers' beliefs, dispositions, or perceptions regarding play (Dako-Gyeke, 2011; Fisher, Hirsch-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2008; Howard, 2010; Leaupepe, 2010; Ranz-Smith, 2007; Tobin & Kurban, 2010). Half of these studies do not address teachers' beliefs, dispositions, or perceptions regarding play in the social and political climate of the United States. Dako-Gyeke's (2011) study addressed the beliefs of teachers in Ghana regarding play. Leaupepe's (2010) study addressed Samoan and Tongan teachers' views of play. Tobin and Kurban's study (2010) of teachers' and immigrant parents' beliefs about play occurred in five countries (England, Italy, Germany, France, and the United States). These studies are less relevant to the current social and political climate of the United States, which has a significant influence on shaping teacher training, curriculum, and teaching practices. Teachers in Samoa, Tonga, and Ghana did not believe play in early childhood classrooms was an important teaching paradigm perhaps because play in childhood is still a stronger part of these cultures than others studied (Dako-Gyeke, 2011; Leaupepe, 2010). In addition to culture, teacher training and experiences for preservice teachers has a significant impact on shaping teachers' beliefs, dispositions, and perceptions of play.

Preservice teachers believe that play is something that is initiated by the child (Sherwood & Reifel, 2010). Preservice teachers did not agree on the meaning of play or

the definition of play or even on which activities constitute play (Sherwood & Reifel, 2010). How much is play a part of preservice training for teachers? The literature examined did not answer that question. Interview questions were used in this dissertation study to collect this data. The literature does indicate that preservice education and experiences is the time during which teachers form their core beliefs (Richards et al., 2002). According to Sherwood and Reifel (2010), "the absence of a universal understanding of play makes incorporating it into a theoretically aligned teacher education program challenging" (p. 335). Though this may indeed be a difficult task, the stance of ignoring play is doing a disservice to both teachers and young children.

The development of teachers' belief systems about play appears to be connected with training. But the research is conflicting. Dako-Gyeke's (2011) study found no significant difference in beliefs and dispositions toward play between teachers who took courses in child development and those who did not. Yet Leaupepe's (2010) study found that, after taking a course, teachers could more easily make connections between play and learning. On one level, these findings are surprising. Other research indicates that teachers with higher levels of education are more likely to provide high quality experiences for young children and be more inclusive of play in their instructional practices (Lara-Cinasomo et al., 2009). On another level, these findings are not surprising.

What is not known is whether play is still being taught in the content of child development courses. Research indicates that only about three-quarters of early care and education professionals receive any kind of formal training (Howard, 2010). According

to Howard's (2010) study, less than 27% of teachers reported receiving any training about play as part of their degree programs. Teachers in the study reported a lack of confidence in using play as a teaching or learning strategy (Howard, 2010).

Though early childhood teachers may agree that play is important, intend to include it in their daily practice, and believe it deserves an important place, many are not sure how to support play. How do teachers' beliefs and intentions play into how teachers teach? An intention is the desire to engage in a certain behavior (Wilcox-Herzog & Ward, 2004). So according to Wilcox-Herzog & Ward, beliefs inform intentions and intentions inform behavior.

The literature reviewed in this section points to the need for a new study. The data and studies reviewed in this section indicate more research is needed in the United States on early childhood teachers' beliefs regarding play and how those beliefs influence their practices in the classroom. The completed study will add to the body of research and help fill a gap in the literature. Further discussion on connections between beliefs and teaching practices and pedagogy will be described in the section on the community of the early childhood classroom.

The Community of the Early Childhood Classroom

The teacher is the core member of the early childhood classroom. The teacher is identified as the core member because, even though the child is central to the classroom, students change from year to year while the teacher remains. The identity of teachers, as formed by their beliefs, dispositions, and behavior within the community, will determine how teachers approach, support, and interact with children. This identity includes their

teaching strategies/instructional practices, including their beliefs regarding play, how they set up the environment, their professionalism, and their awareness of how children learn and construct knowledge (Sheridan, 2007). These inform the practice of the early childhood classroom community and can either invite, or discourage, children's participation and input. Classrooms with higher participation from the children were found to be of higher quality (Sheridan, 2007; Stephen, 2010). Sheridan (2007) described the process of teachers inviting participation and input as the "meeting between the child and the teacher" (p. 208). This kind of collaboration between the teacher and child helps develop the meaning and learning that occur in the early childhood classroom community, so the child must also be considered as a central protagonist. Parents, program/school colleagues, and administrators are also considered in this community. The practice of the community, and learning and meaning, will be discussed further.

Practice. In this aspect of the community of the early childhood classroom, several facets will be explored: teaching strategies/instructional practices, provisioning the classroom, play, professionalism, and perceptions of parents. All of these facets may have connections with teacher beliefs. One important philosophy that has been guiding the field of early care and education and the practice of teachers for many years is Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP). It originally developed in response to a trend in the 1980s toward more academic programming in early childhood programs (Abu-Jaber et al., 2010; Bredekamp, 1987). DAP originally grew from a philosophy that centers on the child and is based on the theories of Piaget and Vygotsky (Abu-Jaber et al., 2010; Bredekamp & Copple, 2009).

Developmentally appropriate practice. The heart of Developmentally

Appropriate Practice (DAP) lies in understanding what is considered developmentally

appropriate for a group of young children, understanding how the skills and development

of the particular group one is teaching fits within that framework, considering the

individual learning styles and needs within the group, the culture of the group, and

planning a curriculum of learning experiences, activities, and materials based on this

information. The focus of DAP is on the "whole child and include social, emotional,

aesthetic, moral, language, cognitive, and physical" domains of development (Abu-Jaber

et al., 2010, p. 66). There is a link between DAP and positive outcomes for children

(Hedge & Cassidy, 2009). Research indicates that children in DAP classrooms are "more

socially mature, less stressed, more creative, and show a greater affinity toward school"

than children in classrooms that do not follow DAP (Hedge & Cassidy, 2009).

There are philosophical differences between teachers that embrace DAP and those

that do not. Teachers using DAP as a basis for their belief system are more likely to

engage children in problem solving, critical thinking, play-based and child-centered

experiences, and to create an environment and classroom atmosphere that supports the

attitude of lifetime learning (Abu-Jaber et al., 2010; McMullen et al., 2007). In contrast,

the traditional teacher focuses more on academics tends to use more direct, formal, or

didactic instruction where skills, tasks, and concepts are taught to whole groups of

children at once often using drill and practice, rote memorization, and worksheets (Abu-

Jaber et al., 2010; McMullen et al., 2007). In these settings, children have less choice and

less opportunity to work collaboratively (Abu-Jaber et al., 2010).

Though these two approaches seem at opposite ends of the spectrum, there were some DAP practices both groups of teachers were observed incorporating: creative arts types activities, displays of children's work, dramatic play, large group time, sensory activities, individualized curriculum, and curriculum focused on social emotional development (McMullen et al., 2007). Play is a part of DAP; it would stand to reason that classrooms following DAP would therefore include play. Research indicates this is not always the case. National Education Policy in India indicates, "child-centered, or play based curriculum" be included as part of early care and education (Hedge & Cassidy, 2009, p. 837). Yet what actually happens in early care and education in India is often different than what one might expect. To help prepare children for the kindergarten classrooms they will attend, where didactic/formal instruction is the norm, there is less play and less room for play than would be expected in a classroom in a country that embraces DAP. This disconnect between teachers' beliefs and practices is not exclusive to India.

One important consideration regarding the literature reviewed and the findings represented is that the majority of studies and research are based on the old framework of DAP. This old framework was much more inclusive of play than the most recent version of DAP published in January of 2009. In the most recent version of DAP, Kuschner (2012) described the tension surrounding play as the struggle between teacher control over play and children's self-directed play. Though the 2009 version of DAP stated, "play needs to be a significant part of the young child's day, and part of a developmentally appropriate classroom," the play referenced and emphasized in the most

recent version of DAP tends to focus on the play teachers have control over, not the type

of child directed play that is more the focus or earlier versions of DAP (Copple &

Bredekamp, 2009, p. 328).

In its 300 plus pages, the new version of DAP only references play 38 times

(Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). In many instances, these are one-word references that

include the word *play*, as in *role play* or *dramatic play*. The three times in the book that a

whole section is devoted to play occur when discussing play for infants and toddlers, not

for preschoolers. In the kindergarten section, the word *play* is mentioned twice. In the

primary grade section, play is not mentioned at all. Teachers who had a difficult time

aligning their practices with the old framework of DAP may find their practices are more

connected with the new framework, which includes less play and more direct instruction.

Research indicates there is a lack of connection between teachers' beliefs and how

those beliefs are reflected in their practices in the classroom. Teachers tend to have a

more optimistic view of their practices and beliefs than is actually observed in their

classrooms (McMullen et al., 2006). There is thus a discrepancy between what teachers

say they believe and how they carry out those beliefs in their practice. Teachers state that

their practices are more developmentally appropriate than they actually are (McMullen et

al., 2006). This has been one of the challenges of the pedagogy of child-centered

learning in gaining support (Pedersen & Liu, 2003). Many teachers do not feel free to put

into practice what they believe in (Wilcox-Herzog & Ward, 2004).

The beliefs of parents and colleagues or the constraints of administrators are

factors that inhibit teachers from acting on what they believe in (Wilcox-Herzog & Ward,

2004). Teachers are more likely to believe in DAP than they are in implementing developmentally appropriate practices (Lara-Cinasomo et al., 2009). Teachers who tended to focus on skills based practices were less likely to engage in child-centered practices (Lara-Cinasomo et al., 2009). Teachers in preschool settings engaged in child-centered practices more than kindergarten or first through third grade teachers (Lara-Cinasomo et al., 2009).

Research seems to indicate that primary grade teachers who had taken college level courses or training in early childhood were more likely to believe in and practice developmentally appropriate practices in their classrooms than teachers who did not have coursework or training in early childhood (Han & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2010; Hedge & Cassidy, 2009). Therefore, education and training are factors that can have an impact in shaping teacher beliefs and practices. Experience is another factor found to have an impact on beliefs and practices (Hedge & Cassidy, 2009). Teachers who believed in their abilities and skills were more likely to implement DAP in their classrooms.

Play and child-centered practices. A lack of true Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP), the lack of play and introduction of more academics as part of preschool curriculum, has to do with pressures to get children ready for formal schooling and to give children a head start academically so they do not fall behind later. The public policy debate related to early care and education focuses on cognitive test scores. However, research indicates that preschools with a focus on academics and cognitive skills may hamper children's academic progress in the long run (Heckman, 2011; Patte, 2010; Wood, 2007). It is the underrated non-cognitive skills that are required for success in

many aspects of life (Heckman, 2011). These skills and abilities include motivation, sociability, the ability to work with others, attention, self-control, self-esteem, and delay of gratification and are increasingly important to adult success in the workplace (Heckman, 2011). The development of these key skills and abilities can be supported through play.

One of the problems in talking about play is that it is such a common term, yet it does not have a common meaning or common definition within the field of early care and education (Sherwood & Reifel, 2010). Experts from educators, to historians, to philosophers, to psychologists, to sociologists, to anthropologists have all studied play, yet none agree on a definition (Erikson, 1975, 1977; Fromberg, 1999; Pellegrini et al., 2007; Piaget, 1969; Pui-Wah, 2010; Sandberg & Samuelsson, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). According to Sutton-Smith (2001), "play is difficult to understand because it is ambiguous" (p. 214). Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, and Gryfe (2008) referred to this as a "crisis in translation"; though the current research indicates that more play time is needed for young children both at home and in the classroom, what that means and what it looks like is often misinterpreted (p. 314). Perhaps part of the problem is that play can be and mean so many things, can take so many different forms, and can also be connected to work.

How play is viewed and how it is defined can depend on the content of the play, the context of the play, the cultural environment, and the experience of the player(s) (Fromberg, 1999). Children and adults express play in many different ways, and adults have many ways and ideas for figuring out what that play means (Sandberg &

Samuelsson, 2003). Play is not necessarily easy to understand or easy to assess (Myck-

Wayne, 2010).

Adults and children have different viewpoints of play, different ways of playing,

and multiple contexts for play (Sutton-Smith, 2001). Sutton-Smith (2001) referred to

play as both a "menagerie" and "diverse happening" (p. 5). Fromberg (1995) described

play as both a verb and a noun and called it a "relative activity" and a "relative behavior"

(p. 27). Play can change based on the context or setting of the play. Fromberg (1995)

defined play as symbolic, meaningful, active, pleasurable, voluntary, rule governed, and

episodic, and describes the value and power of play in the following manner: "Play seems

to be a cauldron in which at different times and in different contexts, various proportions

of cultural, social, cognitive, linguistic, creative, aesthetic, and emotional ingredients

blend" (p. 44).

An idealized view. One way of talking about play is by describing its

characteristics; another way of talking about play is by describing play behaviors. When

adults talk about their childhood play, they speak of games with rules, dramatic play, and

play where they created secret worlds (Sandberg & Samuelsson, 2003). Play behavior

can range from pretend play to jump rope (Fisher et al., 2008). Play is often viewed as a

natural part of childhood (Ailwood, 2003; Sandberg & Samuelsson, 2003). Taking this

kind of idealized or romantic view of play can create difficulties in matching teachers'

beliefs up with their actual practices (Ailwood, 2003; Leaupepe, 2010). Fromberg (1995)

referred to play as part of the "folklorist tradition" of early childhood (p. 45). This kind

of language presents a romanticized view of play and focuses on all of the positive aspects of play and does not consider any of the negative aspects.

A pragmatic view. Another view of play looks at play for the value it has in supporting child development. In this view, one of the most important aspects of play has to do with what children learn in play through imitating life and recreating their experiences (Sandberg & Samuelsson, 2003; Saracho & Spodek, 1995). Play becomes a vehicle to support communication, language and literacy learning, and social and emotional development (Wood, 2007). This pragmatic view of play sees play as connected to the current view and culture of childhood; as children's experiences change so does their play (Sandberg &Samuelsson, 2003). Perhaps it is time for a view of play based on research instead of romantic ideas or practical concerns.

An emerging definition. Most experts agree on several points; for an activity to be considered play, it should be pleasurable and voluntary (Saracho & Spodek; 1995). Providing children with long periods to immerse themselves in play provides them with opportunities to socialize, to create their own worlds. This is what grounds the definition offered in the Introduction above, restated here to help inform the rest of the discussion on play. Play is an essential process (Myck-Wayne, 2010; Pellegrini et al., 2007). It is an enjoyable, creative, and minimally scripted; it is exploration, often without a defined ending in which the participant is totally absorbed and engaged (Bergen, 2009; Myck-Wayne, 2010; Ortlieb, 2010; Pui-Wah, 2010). Play is not necessarily serious, but players are serious about it (Pui-Wah, 2010). Play can be either an individual or group

experience (Ortlieb, 2010). With such a wide definition, it becomes clear to see how difficulties emerge when educators try to adopt play in their classrooms.

Another challenge for educators adopting play in their classrooms is determining whether an observed activity is play and whether learning is occuring. Pui-Wah (2010) identified six core elements that can be found when play and learning are occuring:

1. Clear goals (which are imposed by the player himself)

2. Focused attention

3. Loss of self consiousness

4. Intrinsic motivation

5. An altered sense of time

6. Belief that an experience is worthwhile for its own sake (p. 72).

In order to recognize, support, and extend play while creating learning opportunities from the play, the teacher must be very aware of the child.

Time for play. Children have less free time than they did in the past. There are more planned activities for children and less time for children to engage in spontaneous activities, including play (Anastasiadou, 2008). There is less time for play in school and less time for play in life (Ackerman & Barnet, 2005; Fisher, Ginsburg, 2007; Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, & Gryfe, 2008; Wesley & Buyssee, 2003). Bergen (2009) calls the lack of play occurring in classrooms today unfortunate and indicates there will be an impact felt farther down the road in the fields of science, engineering, and mathematics. These fields require from professionals the kinds of creative divergent thinking skills the development of which are fostered at a young age through play (Bergen, 2009). In

contrast, there is the perception that getting children started earlier in academic pursuits will give them a cognitive advantage. According to Elkind (2007), this perception is wrong. The more structured classrooms are, the less time there is for the kind of uninterrupted play that allows children to immerse themselves deeply in creative play (Howard, 2010; Milteer & Ginsburg, 2012; Sandberg & Samuelsson, 2003).

The implementation of structure that goes along with helping children be prepared for formal schooling and testing creates a climate that is not conducive to play. The lack of play in school for young children can result in higher levels of stress and can be harmful to children's development (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002; Milteer & Ginsburg, 2012; Pellegrini, 2009; Trawick-Smith & Waite, 2009). Boys appear to be more affected by the lack of play than girls (Louge & Harvey, 2010; Trawick-Smith & Waite, 2009). Four year olds have a higher level of activity than older children, but four-year-old boys have an even higher activity level than four-year-old girls. Research shows four-year-old boys tend to be more active and tend to play farther away from adults (Louge & Harvey, 2010). Four year olds are participating in more public preschool programs. This has brought forward the question of how to teach 4 year olds so boys can be as successful as girls. Another gender issue regarding play has to do with how children view themselves through play. So while a lack of play can be harmful to children, it also has an impact on the effectiveness of the adults who teach them.

The lack of play can be harmful for teachers, too. Teachers who believe in play and want to include play, or playful experiences, are pressured to use more formal instruction. The use of this kind of direct, sequential, homogenized practice impairs

teachers' creativity and love of teaching. It also creates a climate of sameness and mediocrity (Frost, 2006).

Ginsburg (2007) indicated that "children are being raised in an increasingly hurried and pressured style that may limit the protective benefits they would gain from child-driven play" (p. 182). Changes in family lifestyle, pressure from other parents, and a focus on academic preparation earlier are part of the problem. Schroeder (2007) cited a recent Public Agenda survey that finds 71% of teachers feel there is too much testing in school, but only 17% of parents polled share that opinion. Clearly, the push toward academic achievement that has forced play into the background does not lie only with teachers and policy makers.

Developmental benefits of play. The benefits of play are not neither agreed upon nor understood. According to Myck-Wayne (2010), this leads to teachers and parents believing that play does not fit in with the learning process. Many studies have illustrated how play benefits social emotional development and the development of non-cognitive skills. Play supports the development of social competence. Through play children learn to cooperate, take turns, function as part of a group, and follow directions (Myck-Wayne, 2010). Positive self- esteem and social and emotional competence are supported through play (Bosacki, Varnish, & Akseer, 2008). Play is not only important in affective development, it supports cognitive development, too (Bosacki et al., 2008).

The quality of children's thinking can change according to what kind of classroom environment they are in. In classrooms with more formal instruction, children tend to engage in more functional play (Johnson & Ershler, 1981). Children in

classrooms more child-centered tend to engage in higher levels of symbolic play

(Johnson & Ershler, 1981). According to Vygotsky (1978), children develop their higher

level thinking through play. Imaginary play, dramatic play where children take roles and

games with rules, were all types of play that Vygotsky (1978) viewed as leading

children's development. Bodrova and Leong (2006) developed Vygotsky's ideas further

and found that play supported abstract thinking. Language and vocabulary development,

learning, logical thinking, and problem solving skills are supported through both dramatic

play and block play (Milteer & Ginsburg, 2012; Myck-Wayne, 2010). According to

Milteer and Ginsburg (2012), "play is so central to child development that it should be

included in the very definition of childhood" (p. e206).

One important effect of play is the impact it has on the ability to control one's

actions and thinking, self-regulation. Another benefit of play, according to Trawick-

Smith and Waite (2009), is the provision of a "heightened quality of adult interactions to

support learning" (p. 10). Meaningful discussion between teachers, and between teachers

and parents, about play can help develop a better understanding about play and the

connections between play and learning.

Parents' perceptions of play. Parents and early childhood teachers have

different views on the importance of play. While both agree that play is an important

foundational activity that sets the stage for future learning, there is disagreement about

what play looks like (Fisher et al., 2008). Early childhood teachers recognize the role of

unstructured play in promoting children's social, emotional, and cognitive development

through problem solving, gaining concept knowledge, creativity, and exposure to early

academic skills like emergent literacy and foundational math concepts (Fisher et al., 2008). Parents see the play that sets the stage for future learning as structured play. The kinds of structured play parents view as valuable are goal-oriented activities and educational toys (Fisher et al., 2008).

Parents have a more conservative view on the use of play in early childhood classrooms. Many parents would like to see a stronger focus on academics in early childhood education (Howard, 2010; Tobin & Kurban, 2010). Parents want their children to develop literacy and numeracy skills to get an leg up so they will be more ready for formal schooling, and they therefore view play as less important (Howard, 2010; Tobin & Kurban, 2010). Parents do not see a connection between play and learning (Fisher et al., 2008). This attitude devalues the social and cultural aspects of play that are also important, perhaps equally important, in supporting the development of young children.

Child-centered teaching practices. There are conflicting views presented by research on child-centered practices. In fact, over 40 different definitions of child-centered practices emerged in current literature (Stephen, 2010). In spite of all the evidence illustrating the benefits of child-centered practice, direct or formal instruction is still favored by most early childhood teachers, particularly kindergarten teachers (Fitzpatrick, Grissmer, & Hastedt, 2011). A focus on direct or formal instruction leaves little room for play.

Play as part of practice. For any type of play to occur, there are certain conditions or elements that must be considered, or must exist. Ailwood (2003) identified several of these; first, the adult must allow a time, space, and place for play as part of the

daily schedule. The teacher is the most important influence on the classroom (Applegate & Applegate, 2004). The teacher promotes an attitude and provides physical space that accommodates the play (Ailwood, 2003; Applegate & Applegate, 2004). There are resources to support play, most especially the presence of an adult invested in relationships who is willing to give children some power and control over their play (Ailwood, 2003).

Teachers must take an important role for play to be successful. Isenberg and Quisenberry (2002) described this as not only a role, but a major responsibility. This responsibility ranges from being a play partner with the youngest players to being an observer and facilitator for older children (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002). Part of the role of the teacher is to provide materials and to create an environment that not only invites play, but also accounts for children's developmental levels and interests. Loughlin and Suina (1982) referred to this as provisioning the classroom.

There are six categories to consider when provisioning the classroom. The categories for provisioning include the following: raw materials, tools, information sources, containers, work spaces, and display facilities (Loughlin & Suina, 1982). Raw materials are open-ended materials that can be used for construction and creation and include everything from pinecones to cardboard paper towel tubes. Tools are used to collect or act on information and include things used for measuring, recording, cutting, and joining. Tools may include clipboards, tape measures, glue, compasses, or digital cameras. Information sources offer data about interests of the child or the curriculum at hand and might include charts, models, reference books, nature specimens, or labels.

Containers are used for mixing, carrying, or storing work in progress. Containers may include egg cartons, pails, cardboard boxes, and plastic bags. Work spaces are places for children to work and can be individual spaces or group spaces. They can be conventional tables, chairs, and desks or non-conventional floor spaces, mats, cushions, or spaces under tables. Display facilities are used for sharing work and can be empty tables, stands, bulletin board, racks, or window ledges. Thoughtful provisioning of the classroom is important because it is part of what allows children to sustain play independently.

At one time, play was a central part of early childhood classrooms, but over time the field of early childhood has undergone many changes. Some of the terms used to describe play in early childhood used to be; *primary learning medium*, *staple of early childhood*, and *tradition of early childhood* (Bergen, 2009, Neuman 2009). In the 1930s, the focus in early childhood classrooms began to shift toward more scientific approaches and toward curriculum that focused more on academics and cognition (Sherwood & Reifel, 2010). This paralleled a shift from focus on child-centered and play-based practices toward more teacher directed activities.

A polarization in the field has occurred: at one end of the spectrum are child-centered and play-based practices; at the other end of the spectrum lie teacher directed and traditional approaches (Sheridan, 2007; Stephen, 2010). The difference between these two approaches has to do with the role of the child and the role of the teacher. In a child-centered approach that includes play, the interests of the children are considered. Children have the "freedom to create their own learning through choosing from a various activities" (Tzuo, 2007, p. 33). A curriculum focused more on traditional approaches

depends on the teacher's control over the children and the manner in which experiences are offered to them. The dichotomy of these two approaches creates what Tzuo (2007) referred to as tension between the control of the teacher and the freedom of the child. The current trend in curriculum seems to indicate that greater teacher control supports children in making academic gains (Tzuo, 2007).

Teachers struggle with the demands of producing outcomes and academic gains and wanting to support what is best for young children. Play and academic outcomes are viewed by many as mutually exclusive (Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Sheridan, 2007; Stephen, 2010; Tuzo, 2007). Though teachers see value in play, the stronger focus on academics and academic gains has led to a decline in play in early childhood classrooms (Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Sherwood & Reifel, 2010).

This means there are also two opposing views about play in the current literature, which is really not a new phenomenon (Pellegrini, 2009). There some who view play as gaining ground and some who see play as fading away (Pellegrini, 2009; Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008). There are some who view play as essential to the healthy social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development of the child, and others who view it as only a small part of the picture (Erikson, 1977, Milteer & Ginsburg, 1012; Pellegrini, 2009; Piaget, 1969). There is no definite agreement about the value of play.

Some research indicated that play has no immediate value for young children but that it is critical for laying a foundation for developing later skills (Pellegrini, 2009; Piaget, 1969). In this viewpoint, play is viewed as a kind of dress rehearsal. It is practice or imitation of a future skill or behavior (Piaget, 1969; Vygotsky, 1978). For example, a

young toddler plays with a baby doll and feeds it with a pretend bottle and has the opportunity to play in this manner repeatedly. When this toddler gets a bit older, one day the pretend baby bottle cannot be found, but the child does find a pine cone and feeds the baby with this as if it were a bottle. The child is using symbolic thinking; the child recognizes that a pine cone is not a baby bottle, but the child is able to accept the pine cone as a symbol to represent a baby bottle. When this child gets to be in kindergarten or first grade, the child will be asked to accept that 'b-o-t-t-l-e' is another symbolic representation of the same pretend baby bottle. So we don't think of toddlers who are playing at taking care of babies in the pretend house area as working on their literacy skills, but clearly there is a connection and a delayed benefit of that play even though, according to some researchers, it has no immediate value.

In many countries, play is valued and accepted as part of an early childhood curriculum, but the trend in the United States is to favor didactic, teacher-directed approaches to early childhood curriculum over play (Patte, 2012). The focus on math and literacy in curriculum as a result of No Child Left Behind has resulted in teachers being discouraged from using play-based learning or playful activities, especially in school (Patte, 2012). It is the value of and belief in play that has so many early care and education professionals defending it. The idea of defending play makes it seem a little like a slogan in a protest march. Pellegrini (2009) cautioned that taking an overzealous approach to play and touting claims about the benefits of play may further drive it from the curriculum and advises "realistic readings of theory and data" to insure the inclusion of play in curriculum (p. 134). The literature challenges how central a focus play should

have in early care and education and indicates that there is an all or nothing mentality that creates a play-work divide (Howard, 2010; Stephen, 2010).

Play and learning are both important parts of children's lives, but school is seen as the place where children learn, not play (Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008). Traditionally, play has been viewed as an activity that is brought forward by the child, and learning has been an activity that is brought forward by the teacher (Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008). Research shows that children are sensitive to who initiates the play—the child or the teacher—and how competent the player is who is initiating the play (Bonawitz, Shafto, Gweon, Chang, Katz, & Schutz, 2009). Children often choose not to participate when the teacher is initiating the play or when a less competent player is initiating the play (Bonawitz et al., 2009).

Play is not the only way children learn, and sometimes when given a choice children will choose activities that are more like work than play (Wood, 2007). Play and work do not have to be mutually exclusive. Though children and teachers tend to see a division between the two, play can be a vehicle to learning. As Samuelsson and Carlsson (2008) explain, play and learning "touch upon each other or run into each other and are transformed in relation to each other" (p. 626). In spite of this shifting landscape, there is still agreement among early childhood professionals that play has value (Howard, 2010; Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002). Play continues to challenge early care and education professionals. There are clear arguments promoting the value of play, but the question remains how much play should be included and what does or what should play look like.

The structure and organization of the classroom can impact the setting for play. The schedule and staffing of an early childhood classroom play a role in the availability of resources to support play. There is a high staff turnover in the field, and an unstable staffing situation in an early childhood classroom does not lend itself to play (Goffin, 2007; Howard, 2010). What teachers know and understand about play can also influence whether it is supported or not.

Some of the bad press play gets has to do with a common problem within the early childhood profession itself. Many early childhood classrooms and programs calling themselves play based have what Trawick-Smith and Waite (2009) referred to as a *laissaez faire* approach. In these classrooms a wait and see what develops approach is adopted. For play to have the greatest impact on learning and development, it must reside within a carefully planned theoretical framework that includes assessment (Trawick-Smith & Waite, 2009).

Play in educational settings is becoming further and further removed from children's experiences. Play, and play activities like recess, are being reduced or eliminated altogether (Fisher et al., 2008; Ginsburg, 2007; Patte, 2010). The time formerly devoted to these activities is used instead for additional lessons or formal instruction on academic content (Fisher et al., 2008). When play is used in the early childhood classroom, it is used in various ways: some teachers use it as a vehicle to support children's learning, some use it as a reward, and some use it as a time filler when other work is done (Leaupepe, 2010; Sherwood & Reifel,

2010). There is much debate on what the proper balance of play and academics should be in an early childhood classroom (Tobin & Kurban, 2010).

Research shows that play, especially dramatic play, supports literacy learning (Bodrova, 2008; Long et al., 2005; Wood, 2007). In spite of empirical evidence, curriculum in many early childhood programs uses direct instruction to teach skills for reading and math instead of play. Play, according to Neuman (2006), has been a traditional staple in early care and education but has now been abandoned for didactic methods. The consequences of this choice are not yet clear (Louge & Harvey, 2010).

In the 1980s the Hong Kong pre-primary education system worked to bring the learning of play ideology back into early childhood classrooms (Pui-Wah, 2010). This was part of an effort to improve the quality of early education and early education classrooms. The curriculum at the time of the research for pre-primary classrooms focused on academics and rote learning, and it used didactic methods of instruction. Teachers found making changes away from a didactic instructional approach and toward a child-centered instructional approach inclusive of play very difficult. In Pui-Wah's 2010 study, teachers continued to struggle with this change. Pui-Wah found that play continues to be at the surface level and that most instruction continues to be done through transmission from the teacher to the student. Teachers know they have to let children play, but they do not necessarily believe in the value of it as a vehicle for learning and instruction.

Even for those teachers who believe in play and believe they are using it as a central part of their practice, it is difficult to talk about the learning that happens through play. This difficulty occurs because play takes so many forms in the classroom and looks different in each form it takes. Play in an early childhood classroom embracing the philosophy of Dewey would look different from play in a classroom embracing the ideas of Frobel. Play of children in a Waldorf classroom has a different focus than play of children in a Montessori classroom. Play in a Head Start classroom using Weikart's model of High Scope curriculum would look different from the play of children in a classroom based on the ideology of Reggio Emilia. Yet in all of these examples, the philosophies cite play as being central to children's learning and central as part of teaching practices.

Each philosophy includes the belief that play should have a role in early childhood education, but among the advocates of these philosophies there is disagreement about what role the teacher should take in play. There are experts who believe teachers should be involved in children's play in a very direct manner and those who believe teachers should take a more hands-off approach. There are many levels and styles of interactions that represent various levels of involvement in play, as identified by Wilcox-Herzog and Ward (2004). These range from (1) uninvolved, (2) caretaker (blowing a child's nose), (3) safety/behavior monitor (redirecting a child), (4) stage manager (getting materials for children), (5) play monitor (watching children play), and (6) play enhancer

(actively playing with children). Wilcox-Herzog and Ward observed that higher

and more advanced levels of play occurred in classrooms where teachers

frequently became involved in the behaviors at the higher end of the scale.

      Meaning and learning. Play can be a way for teachers to develop meaning and

learning in the community of practice of the early childhood classroom. It is not enough

for teachers to believe in play. It is not enough for teachers to be involved in play. To

make play meaningful and translate it into learning experiences there are certain things

that must occur. The teacher must recognize and capture children's interests and joyful

experiences, support children in revisiting these experiences, add learning goals in the re-

visitation of these experiences, share direction and ownership of curriculum, and create a

climate where playfulness can reside (Pui-Wah, 2010).

      The role of the teacher in play is to "make resources available, be an interested

observer (with an eye for both curriculum and assessment), to interact if invited, and to

understand children's play from a developmental perspective" (Patte, 2012, p. 71). To

make this kind of approach to learning successful, teachers need to have a solid

understanding of play and embrace a more open-ended planning strategy (Patte, 2012).

Another role of the adult, according to Patte (2011), is to support playful learning. These

are learning experiences that originate with either the child or the teacher and are

supported by the child's natural inclination toward play. In support of playful learning,

beyond the teacher roles described previously, the teacher must "be sensitive to playful

learning modes, make planned provision, modeling, participating, interacting, and

enhancing vocabulary" (Patte, 2012, p. 72).

The teacher must set up and provision play areas that are rich with materials and that introduce play scenarios (Vu et al., 2010). When teachers introduce scenarios and guide play they are not taking over the play. It is the teacher's role to enrich, enhance, and scaffold the play (Vu et al., 2010). It is this support by the teacher that can blend play and academics (Vu et al., 2010). When teachers engage and are involved in play, studies showed the duration of play, social interaction, cognitive activity, literacy activity, and oral language increase (Vu et al., 2010).

Patte (2012) called this kind of engagement *playful teaching*. Playful teaching is central to the pedagogy of play. The teacher's role in playful teaching is to provide learning experiences that bring forth the children's natural joy, curiosity, and playful nature (Patte, 2012). These experiences are open-ended, imaginative, and active (Patte, 2012). In playful teaching the teacher uses the child's playful nature to support the participation and enthusiasm for the learning opportunity being offered.

Play-based learning offers multiple opportunities for children to learn skills and concepts (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002). Yet it is important to make the distinction that play is not always the same as learning and that learning is not always the same as play. What is important is the recognition that there is learning in play and that there is play in learning.

The opposite of play-based learning is direct, formal, or didactic instruction. Direct instruction has not been shown to have lasting effects (Dean & Khun, 2006). Direct instruction promotes an immediate benefit that Dean and Khun (2006) called correct performance, but the correct performance does not last

over time unless it is practiced in follow-up sessions. The benefits of direct instruction were not found to last without some type of engagement or practice by the student (Dean & Khun, 2006).

A type of mixed approach is the addition of balance to the free play, free choice ideology. This approach includes play, but it also includes the involvement of the teacher in bringing forth the learning within the play. As a result, the teacher's role and the child's role are equally important in a mixed approach (Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008). Each brings something to the play and the learning.

Samuelsson and Carlsson (2008) identified several criteria that must be met for a mixed model of play and learning to be successful. The teacher must have an awareness of both their perspective and the child's perspective. The teacher and child are each involved in the process. The teacher must be sensitive to the child's perspective when setting goals. Peer-like communication must exist between the teacher and the children.

In research conducted by Lara-Cinasomo et al. (2009), only four focus groups of preschool teachers out of seven groups identified play as being an important learning activity for young children, and only two of the seven groups identified hands-on activities as being important. These activities were considered by this group to be the least important types learning activities. Child-guided activities and one-on-one activities were identified by these groups as being the most important types of learning activities.

A variety of strategies and techniques positively affect child outcomes and support a mixed approach. Wood (2007) presented seven of these effective pedagogical practices:

- Modeling appropriate language, encouraging dramatic play, asking questions and interacting verbally with children.

- Both teaching and instruction provided in play and through routines.

- A balance of teacher-directed group work and activities children self-select that include play.

- A balance of adult-led and child-selected activities that include play.

- A balance of direct teaching and activities where the teacher acts to guide children's thinking.

- Teacher support of children in "sustained shared thinking" (Wood, 2007, p. 313).

In sustained shared thinking, teachers help children construct meaning and understanding about their experiences through dialogue.

Difficulties in implementing play. When teachers discuss their role in play, they speak of being facilitators, role models, and see their role as one of offering support (Howard, 2010). Few teachers describe actually playing with children (Howard, 2010). In order to support a play-based curriculum, teachers must understand play on several different levels. A theoretical knowledge base offers teachers a developmental view of play and knowledge about

characteristics of play, and it provides the underpinnings that support play in the classroom.

Research shows that one of the greatest negative impacts on quality of play occurs when teachers frequently call the children away from play to complete other tasks (Rogers & Evans, 2007). Pui-Wah (2010) observed a lack of quality of play in early childhood classrooms of teachers who included play. Play in these classrooms was at what Bodrova and Leong (2007) would consider a low level of play without a lot of mastery. In observed play, children engaged in repetitive behaviors, play was mainly solitary, and it lacked a connection to learning (Pui-Wah, 2010). The main purpose of the play was recreational and occurred without much involvement from teachers.

Outside the classroom, play is accepted and valued as an important part of childhood as a recreational activity. Most adult perspectives of play view it as a break from work (Elkind, 2007). So the idea of play as part of a classroom causes controversy right from the start. Using play or terminology related to play within elementary school classrooms and within early childhood classrooms, especially in relationship to curriculum, creates discord. The perception of school, even at the preschool level, is that it includes, or should include, a curriculum that goes far beyond recreation (Youngquist & Pataray-Ching, 2004). As a result, the need remains for teachers to interpret the play that occurs in early childhood classrooms as meaningful, supported by theory, and valuable as curriculum in a school setting in a way that does not draw criticism from those who connect play only with recreation.

Research showed that teachers are more inclusive of play as a teaching and
learning paradigm than parents would like (Howard, 2010; Tobin & Kurban, 2010). The
play that parents are more willing to support is a more structured variety of play
(Howard, 2010). One of the reasons cited for teachers and parents sharing different
views and beliefs about play as part of the curriculum is due to parents believing the
children should be taught the way they were taught, through formal instruction (Tobin &
Kurban, 2010). There appears to be a lack of recognition from parents that children
could learn the same academic skills during or through play.

There are some countries that support a national curriculum that embraces play
(Howard, 2010; Pui-Wah, 2010; Sahlberg, 2011; Sheridan, 2007; Trageton, 2005). In
spite of this support, teachers in these countries can still feel challenged to embrace play
as part of their teaching practices (Howard, 2010; Pui-Wah, 2010; Sheridan, 2007). This
type of reform was tried unsuccessfully in Britain. After the Plowden Committee
concluded investigating classrooms in Britain the committee recommended that Britain
embrace a more progressive philosophy in education (Emmott, 1998). These
recommendations included less whole group instruction and more work with smaller
groups and individuals. By connecting their findings with the work of Piaget and Dewey
the committee recommended that play should hold a prominent place in the classroom
(Emmott, 1998).

These progressive ideas were embraced in the 1960's after the committees report
and for a time up to 70% of the child's day in school were spent in play, but by the
1980's teaching practices reverted to children sitting in rows in desks once again in all

primary classrooms (Emmott, 1998). The type of teaching that emerged as a result of the

committee's work was a kind of hybrid and in some classrooms resulted in chaos. It is

not clear that teachers were really following the recommendations that the report

intended, but the 1988 Education Act in Britain moved away from the Plowden

Committee recommendations and back to more stringent, structured methods of teaching

calling the methods recommended by the committee (Trageton, 2005). The shift away

from play meant a shift back toward whole group instruction "in addition social problems

including bullying in school increased" (Trageton, 2005, p. 165). Research shows

teachers often revert to previous outcomes-based models (Howard, 2010; Pui-Wah,

2010).

Outcomes-based models are often favored because they show measurable results.

According to Howard (2010), there are four other factors to consider: the practitioners'

training and theoretical knowledge regarding play, the practitioners' confidence in play

and in defending play, the type of play opportunities offered in the classroom and the

practitioners' engagement in those opportunities, and other barriers to using play as part

of teaching practices.

There are forces that either work together or against each other when considering

the difficulties in implementing play in early childhood classrooms: philosophy/theory,

pedagogy, and public policy. Theory and philosophy influence teachers' dispositions

toward play. Teacher dispositions influence pedagogy or practices in the classroom.

Research shows that there is a connection between teacher beliefs and practices and the

Socio Economic Status (SES) of the group of children in the classroom. Teachers of

children from families with low SES tend to view academics as more important than play

in order to help close the achievement gap (Lee & Ginsburg, 2007; Nicopoloulou, 2010).

Last, public policy can determine trends in education and influence practices in the

classroom. Further exploration of these influences and research may uncover some of the

issues and problems early care and education teachers face when implementing play as a

teaching and learning strategy.

Summary

The conceptual framework of situated learning theory and communities of

practice support the central question that forms this study: How are early childhood

teachers' beliefs regarding play connected to their practices? The literature review

described two important communities of practice that teachers engage in as member—the

sociopolitical community and the early childhood classroom community. The teacher is

discussed separately as the member that bridges both communities. Each community of

practice may have important influence on teacher beliefs regarding play and their

practices in the classroom, and each community is considered in relationship to teachers'

beliefs, dispositions, and perceptions of play and connections to classroom practices.

The Sociopolitical Community

The literature showed how the sociopolitical community influences what happens

in early childhood classrooms. Changes in public policy have to be connected to the

culture of society to be effective. Germany and Sweden have been successful in making

positive changes in early care and education because those changes were parallel to and

reflective of the culture (Sheridan, 2007). India and some countries in the UK tried to

bring about change through public policy by focusing policy makers' interest on play as an important learning strategy (Hedge & Cassidy, 2009; Howard, 2010). This effort had mixed results. According to Howard (2010), the difficulty with this initiative lies with a "discrepancy between theoretical, legislative, and pedagogical perspectives" (p. 92). This finding would that indicate creating social change will be most successful if there is an alignment between public policy and culture.

The Teacher

Understanding what early childhood teachers believe could be a pathway toward improving early childhood education. Further research is needed examining the relationship between teachers' beliefs and their practices (Pedersen & Liu, 2003). Changing teacher practices without considering teacher beliefs is often unsuccessful (Lee & Ginsburg, 2007). This type of attempt at change is a top down model where information is offered or poured in in an attempt to create change. Changes in teacher practices are a direct result of changes in their beliefs (Richards et al. 2001). Change in beliefs in personal and professional contexts is a bottom up model of change.

Better models of professional development for teachers are needed in order to affect change. Teachers' beliefs are connected to their development as professionals (Richards et al., 2001). Due to a lack of preservice training, early childhood teachers are challenged to understand the theoretical underpinnings that support play and to integrate them into their practice. Integration of play has to fit within a curriculum structure that teachers sometimes have no control over and often have limited resources to support. Teachers are also challenged to support the educational objectives of the curriculum

while conforming to demands of current public policy and parents' desires. All of these factors influence the prevalence of play in early childhood classrooms.

Community of the Early Childhood Classroom

Looking carefully at the contribution of play to an early childhood curriculum can perhaps promote it to a stronger position in the classroom and in the repertoire of teachers' practices. Even when a teaching strategy promotes best practice and is supported by research, it will not gain acceptance unless both teachers and parents embrace it (Heal, Hanley, & Layer, 2009). The role of teachers in early care and education is crucial. It is thus important to understand the beliefs of teachers and how these beliefs shape teaching practices. Understanding what influences teachers' decision making and planning provides a window into what teachers believe is important. These belief systems heavily influence the outcomes of early childhood programs.

Learning and meaning. Pedagogy concerns itself with the act of teaching and what it is teachers do to support learning in the classroom (Stephen, 2010). Stephen (2010) found teachers were reluctant to discuss pedagogy. A reluctance to discuss pedagogy and practice creates difficulties in engaging in meaningful discussions about teaching and bringing about change. Where does this reluctance to discuss pedagogy come from? Why is it difficult for early childhood teachers to engage in meaningful discussions about their teaching? More important, how does this reluctance to engage in discussion about pedagogy impact teaching practices? Perhaps this reluctance is the next area of research and these are the next research questions moving forward.

The dialogue about pedagogy matters because to truly embrace play as part of practice teachers have to have a knowledge base and theoretical understanding of play. One of the effective strategies in changing teachers' beliefs is for teachers to have professional development experiences that help them uncover their beliefs and give them time for reflection with their colleagues (Richards et al., 2002). Teachers have to develop this self-awareness in order to consider changes and to be accountable to parents and policy makers.

Play as part of practice. For hundreds of years theorists have been talking about child's play. Teachers, parents, and experts have not only discussed but argued about the role of play as a vehicle for learning in the classroom. Piaget's (1969) view supported the idea that play and experiences in play are the child's work. The idea that children learn by doing, or playing, seems to be a common thread among many of the important traditions/movements in early childhood education. Froebel and Montessori viewed the child's activity as self-motivated (Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008). High Scope created a structure within which children must be active participants. In Reggio Emilia theory, what children do hinges on their interaction with the environment and the people within that environment.

How children play, act, or do what they do within early childhood programs influences their development. Although there is a strong body of research that illustrates the contribution play makes to children's development and well-being, it is taking some time for public opinion and policy makers to catch up. This time lag in turn affects teachers' practice. A better alignment of research, policy, and practice is needed.

Placement of this Study in the Literature

The research does not currently address how early childhood professionals view/conceptualize/address play (Fisher et al., 2008). There are only a small number of studies that focus on teachers' beliefs, dispositions, and perceptions of play. Only three of them are connected to the political and social culture of early childhood teachers specific to the United States (Fisher, Hirsch-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2008; Howard, 2010**;** Ranz-Smith, 2007). Two of these studies discuss teachers' beliefs and views of play, yet this is only half of the central question of this study. The research shows the negative impact a lack of play has on child development, but it does not show how the lack of play has affected teachers and teaching practices. Only one of these studies makes connections between early childhood teachers' beliefs regarding play and the connection those beliefs have to their practice.

Future Research on Play and Teaching

More studies on the connections between teachers' views on play and how these beliefs impact teachers' classroom practices are needed. It is also important to have a better understanding of the place of play in preservice training. A clearer picture of what kind of theoretical background and understanding about play preservice teachers have as they enter the field would create an understanding about what further training is needed. Another barrier to research and in developing training is a lack of a shared definition of play.

Moving toward a shared definition of play would help both in preservice and in-service training for early childhood teachers as well as provide a platform for educating

other members of society, including policy makers, about the benefits of play (Fisher et al., 2008; Pellegrini, 2009). Play has become a generic label for most of children's activities and behaviors, especially those involving peer interactions (Pellegrini, 2009). This wholesale use of play as a generic label means that those using it as a label either misunderstand play or have only a surface knowledge of play. The danger of this practice continuing means that play may continue to be misunderstood and misaligned with both policy and teaching practices.

This study may promote a positive social change in the field of early childhood education. Understanding and clarifying teachers' current beliefs and perceptions around play will make it possible to see how well teacher beliefs and perceptions regarding play match up with their practices and with current educational trends and public policy. A case study that helps to provide a clearer understanding of the way early childhood teachers view play may help restore play to a prominent place in the early childhood classroom as a teaching practice, instructional strategy, and curriculum choice. A detailed examination of the methodology will be provided in Chapter 3, beginning with a description of the research design and tradition. The rationale for selecting a case study will be offered. The purposeful selection of participants, role of the researcher, data collection, analysis, and threats to quality will be described. The ethics and feasibility of the study will also be explored in addition to issues of trustworthiness.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The review of the literature in Chapter 2 demonstrated the impact changes in the political and social arenas have had on the landscape of early care and education. The bar of accountability in early education has been raised through the mandate that children achieve proficiency in specific academic skills and standards in the domains of reading, writing, math, and science by third grade (NCLB, 2002). Though numerous studies illustrate the important contribution play makes to the learning and development of young children, play and early childhood teachers' use of play as an instructional strategy have been negatively affected by a stronger focus on academics in early childhood classrooms (Bishop-Josef & Zigler, 2011; Frost, 2007; Miller & Almon, 2009; Vu et al, 2012). The research indicates that play is an important support for academic achievement, but there is a gap between research and practice (Patte, 2012; Vu et al., 2012).

Context of the Study

In previous decades, research indicated that early childhood teachers shared a strong philosophical alignment with play. What is not clear is how early childhood teachers perceive play today, and how teachers' current perceptions impact the role of play as part of teacher practices in early childhood classrooms and curriculum. This qualitative multiple case study in six early childhood classrooms helped address this gap in the literature and provided an opportunity to gain a further understanding of early childhood teachers' dispositions toward play. Teachers' perceptions and beliefs were examined through interviews, classroom observation, and document analysis to gain a

clearer perspective on the current role of play in the early childhood classroom. Data gathered from these sources was interpreted and analyzed to identify patterns and themes. These themes and patterns were be developed and explored through discussion in a follow up interview. The results of this qualitative case study may be used to communicate with educators and perhaps help restore play as an integral part of early education.

This chapter will provide a detailed examination of the methodology of the study, beginning with a description of the research design and tradition. The rationale for choosing a case study will be offered. The purposeful selection of participants, role of the researcher, data collection, analysis, and threats to quality will be described. The ethics and feasibility of the study will also be explored.

Research Design

The purpose of this study was to understand the meaning of early childhood teachers' beliefs and the connections those meanings have to their practices. Through uncovering those beliefs and meanings, the possibility to explore the influence that beliefs and meanings have on teacher practices emerged. Through the study, a closer examination of some of the influences the context of early childhood education has in shaping those beliefs occurred. The stated focus, with the intellectual goals offered made a qualitative tradition a good fit for this study (Maxwell, 2005). A quantitative study might answer the question: Is there a connection between early childhood teachers' beliefs about play and their practices in the classroom? But a quantitative study

answering that question would simply offer an answer without uncovering the patterns or meaning behind the answer.

This qualitative multiple case study of six cases in multiple systems offered various perspectives on the issue being studied. The study explored the relationship early childhood teachers' perceptions of play has to their practices in the classroom. This relationship was explored through participants' stories and perspectives collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis. This study interpreted the phenomenon of play and pedagogy and the meaning being given to it by participants of the study.

Though a historical perspective is considered in this study, the historical aspect is provided as a contrast between what was known about early childhood teachers' beliefs concerning play and a lack of knowledge about what is now known regarding teachers' beliefs concerning play. The placement of this study with a contemporary phenomenon in a real life context is one of the aspects that offer a good match for a case study (Yin, 1984). According to Yin (1984), there are two other considerations in determining whether a case study is a good match for a research project. One factor is the type of question being asked. *How* and *why* questions are best suited to a case study (Yin, 1984). A third criterion Yin (1984) considered for the case study is the amount of control the researcher has over the event or events being studied. When the researcher has no control over the event or phenomenon being studied, a case study is considered a good match.

There are other characteristics of case studies to consider. Case studies allow for an in-depth examination of a topic or phenomenon using multiple types of data, including data collected from interviews, observations, and documents (Creswell, 2007). In this

way, a case study allows a place for the perspective of the participants of the study (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 1984). And, finally, in case studies the researcher has a connection to the community being studied (Merriam, 2002).

Other qualitative methods were considered for this study. The second method considered for studying the relationship between teachers' beliefs in play and their practices in the classroom was a narrative approach. The research questions could be answered with a narrative approach by collecting the stories of kindergarten teachers, preschool teachers, and parents on their perceptions of play. Collecting, interpreting and retelling the story of the participants is the heart of narrative analysis (Merriam, 2002). This narrative could illustrate how perceptions on play influence curriculum choices in preschool and kindergarten. This approach, however, does not lend itself as well to document analysis of classroom daily schedules or curriculum plans.

The third method considered for studying the relationship between teachers' beliefs about play and their practices was a phenomenological study. According to Mirriam (2002), phenomenology examines the lived experiences of the participants and identifies the essence of those experiences. Studying the lived experience of play in an early childhood setting from the perspective of parents and teachers could answer some of the research questions, but not all of them. It would provide some very specific perspectives and data, but it would not be as good for identifying general patterns and meanings.

Choosing a case study as the approach for this topic of study was the best method for several reasons. First and most important, this method provided the best possible

vehicle to answer the question at hand. It allowed for a deep exploration of the hypothesis that there is some kind of relationship between teachers' beliefs and disposition toward play and their curriculum choices, instructional models, and teaching practices in the classroom. The fact that this relationship was not predetermined provided an open-ended aspect to the case study, leaving room for the participants to influence the findings of the study. The methods of data collection also align with case study research. Interviews and observations were conducted and documents were examined. Analyzing multiple sources of data offered descriptions that are thick and rich. Finally, the researcher has strong beliefs regarding play and concern for the state of play in addition to having been an integral part of the early childhood community for decades.

Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore the question: How do early childhood teachers' beliefs about and disposition toward play connect with their practices in the classroom? The subquestions that follow this central question are:

1. What are teachers' current beliefs, perceptions, or dispositions toward play?

2. What influences shaped teachers' beliefs (training, mentor, parents)?

3. How are teachers' beliefs regarding play and teaching practices, instructional models, and curriculum choices used in the classroom related?

4. How do teachers perceive the role of play in early childhood classrooms?

Methodology

The goal of the proposed qualitative multiple case study was to examine six early childhood teachers' beliefs and dispositions toward play through individual, structured interviews with early childhood teachers in preschool and kindergarten classrooms. Observations of teachers in their classrooms were conducted. In addition to being interviewed twice, teachers who volunteered to participate in the study provided documents including daily schedules and curriclum plans for analysis. The analysis of data and results of the study provided a better understanding of what the relationship is between teachers' beliefs in play and teaching practices, curriculum choices relating to formal/didactic instruction, child-centered practices, and play-based curriculum. These results may support the idea of using play as an important teaching and learning strategy in early childhood classrooms and help inform choices in the classroom around curriculum, instruction, and teaching practices.

Sampling Strategy and Participants

In addition to using purposeful sampling for this study, some sampling was conceptually driven. Early childhood teachers, to include six preschool teachers made up the sample for this study. Teachers were selected based in part on their teaching credential and experience. Each teacher participating in the study held a credential (such as a Child Development Associate credential, Montessori teacher credential, a Waldorf Teacher Education diploma, or a college degree, in early childhood, or in a field closely related to early childhood education, such as elementary education, child development, or

special education), and taught in the field for at least 3 years. Another criterion for

participant selection was the quality of the program where participants taught.

One indicator of quality in early childhood programs is based on a Quality Rating

System (QRS), or Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS). These are systems

developed on a state-by-state basis. Currently there are 22 states with a QRS or QRIS

system in place and four other states in the process of designing or piloting a QRS or

QRIS system (Zellman, Brandon, Boller, & Kreader, 2011). These systems are designed

to improve the quality of early childhood programs. Each state develops its own set of

standards, and programs are rated on their attainment of those standards. In some states,

quality improvement is supported by financial incentives, and in some states programs

are given support to attain higher levels of quality (Zellman et al., (2011). Improved

child outcomes, including school readiness, are results of quality improvement resulting

from high quality responsive care (Zellman et al., 2011).

A second measure of quality recognized nationally for early childhood programs

is accreditation by the National Association for the Education of Young Children

(NAEYC). NAEYC Accreditation is a voluntary system to measure quality in early

childhood programs (NAEYC, 2012). This system sets high standards for

professionalism and is designed around 10 standards: relationships, curriculum, teaching,

assessment of child progress, health, teachers, families, community relationships,

physical environment, and leadership and management (NAEYC, 2012). Each standard

has benchmarks of quality that must be achieved in order to attain or maintain

accreditation. Quality of early childhood programs considered in this study were

measured by their rating in their state's QRS or QRIS; only programs at the top tier of the system or those who achieved NAEYC accreditation were considered.

In the case of private or public school-based kindergarten programs, measures of quality were be considered through two sources: state standards and national ranking. As with early childhood programs, each state has its own set of standards and accountability system for measuring the quality of public and private elementary schools (United States Department of Education, 2009). Schools in alignment with their state standards receive a positive rating, and those that do not receive a positive rating receive instructions for making improvements. The United States Department of Education (2009) referred to these as "state differentiated accountability plans" (p. 2). There is an expectation of alignment between state standards and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). A ranking is assigned to the school based on the results of the NAEP standardized testing scores. Participants in this study from programs in public or private elementary schools came from programs receiving a high national ranking and successful alignment with state standards. Public or private elementary school programs with teachers participating in the study had 50% or more of their students scoring at the proficient or proficient with distinction rating (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, 2012).

Participants in the study were selected from one geographical area limited to one state. By using this procedure, the same QRS or QRIS applied to all preschool classrooms, and the same state and national standards applied to all kindergarten classrooms. Programs were solicited for participation in the study through letters to

program administrators. Once an administrator's permission was secured for

participation, letters were sent to the appropriate classroom teachers within each of those

programs inviting their participation. Responses were sorted into *yes* or *no*. *Yes*

responses were further sorted by kindergarten teachers or preschool teachers' and the six

participants were drawn at random from those responses.

The use of multiple cases to include one case from each site was chosen to

strengthen the findings of the study. According to Yin (2009), a companion case or cases

can "augment the single case—and produce a stronger effect" (p. 62). One sample within

each case was selected. The use of multiple cases may add significance to the results

(Merriam, 2002). The embedded design was used because data from each case will be

looked at individually rather than being pooled.

Choosing participants from various settings added diversity to the data through

multiple perspectives. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), small purposeful

sampling in qualitative research yields the best results. The sample size of six cases was

chosen for several reasons. Six cases fitting the criteria outlined represent the diversity of

early childhood programs in the area where the study was conducted. A sample size of

six participants, one from each case, providing two interviews, a classroom observation

each, and documents to analyze should provide enough data to provide saturation. Guest,

Bunce, and Johnson (2006) found main themes for studies emerged within six interviews

and data saturation occurred within 12 interviews. A sample size of six cases with 12

interviews and other data from six different classrooms provided data saturation and also

provided triangulation, validity, and stability of results.

Adding more cases to the sample size would make the case study too large to provide a meaningful perspective, although, according to Patton (2002), there is no rule of thumb on how large or small a sample should be. It is a matter of managing and weighing breadth against depth. Managing a larger amount of data yields less depth, but it presents a broader perspective of an issue (Patton, 2002). A smaller amount of data leads to a thick, rich description and a focused point of view.

It was determined that a sample size of six cases would provide enough data for saturation to occur and to present and represent the beliefs and dispositions of typical early childhood teachers while remaining small enough to provide an in-depth look at how these beliefs and dispositions impact their practices in the classroom. A purposeful sampling strategy was employed to provide a sample that is representative of a high quality, well trained, experienced early childhood teacher population. The rationale for this choice was that this is the population of teachers most likely to embrace the most contemporary research based practices in the field. A kindergarten teacher included in the sample was based on the rationale presented by Ranz-Smith (2007) that "this is the grade level when typically the focus shifts from child-centered, open-ended experiences to a content-centered emphasis with tasks assigned by the teacher to develop skills" (p. 278). Though the shift typically occurs in kindergarten there is also evidence in the research to indicate it is occurring even earlier (Miller & Almon, 2006; Miller & Almon, 2009). This is why, although kindergarten teachers and classrooms were included in this study, the main focus was preschool teachers and classrooms. This small, purposeful, conceptually driven sample provided rich data for this study.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher in this study was to design and carry forth the study, collect and analyze data, and evaluate, write up, and present the findings. The researcher was also responsible for scheduling interviews, observations, and doing follow up reminders if necessary to ensure participants complete their role in the study. In Maxwell's (2005) view, an important consideration in establishing relationships in research is that the researcher is also part of the social world he or she studies. This is very true in this case study. I am a director and preschool teacher of a program accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). I also teach at the college level and previously taught kindergarten. This background will help with the trustworthiness of this study and in establishing a relationship with other teachers by approaching them as a colleague first and researcher second. This was integral to the success of the study because I was the primary data collector.

In addition to collecting and analyzing data, the researcher must address any ethical issues that may arise. Teachers from the early childhood program where I am director were excluded from the study. Teachers of early childhood programs who were my current students were also excluded from the study. These measures helped to eliminate any potential bias or conflict of interest in regard to relationships with participants of the study.

Data Collection and Recording Tools

Interviews of early childhood teachers were the primary method of data collection. Other data sources included classroom observations and analysis of

documents provided by teachers. These data sources were closely aligned with interview

questions and findings were used in follow-up interviews. How or whether play was

addressed in non-observed activities listed in the schedule or in curriculum plans was an

important focus in follow-up interviews. Member checks also occurred during follow-up

interviews. According to Patton (2002), interviews are an essential tool to gain and

understand the other person's perspective. Although a case study can utilize a variety of

data collection tools, interviews are a frequently used method to determine the

perspectives and perceptions of participants. Structured interviews were be conducted.

Qualitative studies need some structure to help orient the direction of the research

(Miles & Huberman, 1994). Miles and Huberman (1994) stated that more experienced

qualitative researchers may enter the interview process in an unstructured way, but the

vast amount of data collected can quickly become difficult to manage. This can lead to

difficulties in coding and analyzing data (Creswell, 2007). To facilitate the process of

data gathering, a protocol using structured interviews was employed.

Although Creswell (2007) suggested structuring research questions that keep

participants focused, Creswell also stressed the importance of flexibility. Using focused,

but open-ended, research questions provided structure to the interviews but also gave

participants the opportunity to discuss and respond to the questions more fully (Creswell,

2007; Turner, 2010). For example, the question, "How have your experiences as an early

childhood teacher influenced your beliefs about play?" is both structured and open-ended,

but it implies that the teacher has in fact been influenced by their experiences. By asking

instead, "How have your experiences as an early childhood teacher either influenced or

not influenced your beliefs about play?" the question invites participants to talk more fully about all of their experiences related to play.

Questions for the structured interviews are provided in Appendix A. Structured interviews were scheduled and conducted by this author at a time and place convenient to the participants. Questions for the structured interviews were developed based on the research question and subquestions. Some subquestions were asked directly to the participants. For example, "What is the role of play in your classroom?" For the central question of the study and most of the subquestions, there were other questions that connect and lead into them. These connections are outlined in detail in the matrix in Appendix C. These questions were designed to elicit a more thoughtful response from participants that considered multiple angles of each question than would have been gained by simply asking the central question and the subquestions directly. Material supporting the development of the interview questions came from the literature review and the work of Pedersen and Liu (2003), Pui-Wah (2010), Wilcox-Herzog and Ward (2004), and Wood (2007).

For this study, additional data were collected through a classroom observation and the analysis of documents provided by each teacher. Including data from other sources provided a diverse collection of data for analysis (Turner, 2010). Data from a classroom observation of each early childhood teacher in the study included handwritten field notes and video tape (when permissible) collected at the time of the two-hour observation by the author of the study. The classroom observation sheet found in Appendix B was used to record data from the observation. The focus of the observation was the teacher. The

role of the observer was to observe how the teacher was employing, engaging in, or supporting the purposing of the classroom, learning opportunities, and interactions listed on the observation sheet. The observation and the data collected from it helped to answer the question and subquestions related to teacher practice. In part, the items included for consideration on the classroom observation sheet were developed with support of the literature review and, more specifically, the work of Loughlin and Suina (1982), Patte (2012), Pui-Wah (2010), Trageton (2005), Wilcox-Herzog and Ward (2004), and Wood (2007).

Documents from each classroom were collected and analyzed. The documents requested were a daily classroom schedule and a copy of curriculum plans. Teachers were invited to add other documents they believed would provide reflection and representation of their beliefs and practices. Analysis of the documents collected provided a more complete picture of the dally practices in the classroom and helped answer the central question of the study and the subquestions that have to do with teacher practices. An analysis of the documents was supported with the data evaluation sheet for classroom schedules and curriculum plans in Appendix D. The data sheet was based on the literature, primarily on the work of Patte (2012) and Wood (2007).

Although no pilot study was conducted to test the validity and reliability of the specific tools for this study, the tools were reviewed by four other early childhood teachers. Two reviewers were professionals in the field, one with decades of experience and one with a PhD. The other two reviewers were early childhood teachers who fit the criteria of subjects for the study. All reviewers were excluded from the study in order to

prevent bias. After their review of the tools for the study, suggested word changes and other revisions were made. Information gathered using these tools provided an adequate answer to the central question of the study.

Data Collection Procedures

Three types of data were collected for this study. The primary data collection occurred through two interviews with each teacher. The procedure for collecting data was as follows. The initial interview was a face-to-face structured interview at a predetermined time and place convenient to the teacher. Data were recorded in interviews with a tape recorder placed between the researcher and interviewee and by pen and paper in case the tape recorder failed or was unable to pick up the voices of the participants.

The interviewer used the questions designed to elicit data regarding the central research question and subquestions of the study from Appendix A for the interview, and the interviewer used prompts to further draw out the response of the interviewee (Creswell, 2007). Questions were asked one at a time. The interviewer took notes, checked occasionally to make sure the tape recorder was working, remained as neutral as possible, and managed time and transitions by staying on topic (Turner, 2010). Initial interviews lasted for one hour and were used to collect background information and answer specific interview questions. Each teacher was interviewed individually two times.

The second interview was a follow-up interview and was conducted after the classroom observation and after analysis of the curriculum plans and classroom

schedules. The questions for the follow-up interview were based on information

collected through the initial interview, classroom observation, and document analysis.

Follow-up interviews occurred either face-to-face or over the phone, as determined by the

teacher, and lasted for one half hour. The data were collected in the same manner as the

first interview. The purpose of the second interview was to follow up on or clarify

questions arising from the initial interview, observation, or document analysis.

Documents provided the second type of data. During the initial interview,

documents, including a sample of the daily schedule and a curriculum plan, were

collected for analysis. Daily schedules provided further insight as to how much time was

set aside for play in each classroom daily. Samples of curriculum plans provided further

insight as to teaching practices. Both of these documents offered a more generalized

view and additional information about the teachers' practices beyond what the observer

experienced in a 2.5-hour window on one specific day. Teachers were invited to add any

other documents to this collection that they believe to be reflective of their beliefs and

practices during the initial interview or observation visit.

The third method to collect data occurred through classroom observations of

curriculum choices, teaching practices, and instructional models used. The data collected

on the data sheet from the interview showed how the environment of the classroom was

set up and what types of materials were available. The role of the observer was to

observe how the teacher was employing, engaging in, or supporting the purposing of the

classroom, learning opportunities, and interactions with children listed on the observation

sheet. This provided further insight as to the connection between teacher beliefs and their

practices in the classroom. Data from a classroom observation of each early childhood teacher in the study was collected through a two-hour visit and observation of each classroom teacher. During the observation, handwritten field notes were used to collect data using pen and paper. A video camera was set up and used to record classroom sessions during the observation when permissible.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Systems must be used for organizing and managing data. Creswell (2007) suggested in a smaller study that a hybrid approach that uses both a physical system and a computer system for data management and analysis could be a good fit. Miles and Huberman (1994) also discussed the necessity for physical systems for managing and organizing data. This hybrid approach was the one used for this study. The software program NVivo was used as the computer system in addition to the physical system to assist in analysis and interpretation of data.

Software tools such as NVivo can be useful for managing and analyzing qualitative data. This study generated a large amount of data from multiple sources. NVivo features for storage, transcription, graphics, coding, and memo were used to help manage, organize, and analyze the data. These features were helpful for working with and analyzing the different types of data collected in this study.

The data collected through interviews and observations were transcribed. All data were analyzed and coded first using a set of organizational codes developed from the research questions. The identification of themes and patterns through coding and analysis provided guidance in interpreting the data and finding meaning.

Data analysis began early in the study. Data analysis and coding can begin with reading interview transcripts, transcribing interviews, and reviewing other data collected such as documents or field notes from observations or interviews (Maxwell, 2005; Patton, 2002). It can even begin as early as writing field notes during the interview itself. To this researcher, it would seem that pre-coding begins even earlier than collecting data. It seems to begin with the design of the data collection instrument. In formulating interview questions to collect data, the researcher is already making decisions, not only about what data to collect but about what type of data will be generated, and creating hypotheses about what the answers to the interview questions might be. It is these possible answers to the questions that provide the researcher with what Patton (2002) described as *starting categories* for coding, or as Maxwell (2005) named them, *organizational categories*.

During field work, there was space to follow the advice of Miles and Huberman (1994) to refine analysis as the fieldwork is happening. This follow-up offered the possibility of improving the quality of future data collected. The next step in analysis involved reading and transcribing the interviews and field notes.

Once data from field notes as transcribed, they were be uploaded in NVivo. Documents and video were uploaded as well. The research questions were be used to help develop a set of organizing codes to pre-code data. Several precoding organizational categories emerged from the research question and subquestions: *beliefs and approach to play, classroom practices, role of the teacher, role of the parent, role of the child, time*

and space for play in the classroom, and *role of play*. These categories stem from the initial research question and four subquestions.

These categories did not interpret or assign meanings to data, they were merely bins to sort data into. According to Ranz-Smith (2007), "open coding of the data allowed for categorical organization of the findings within an iterative mode of analysis," (p. 277). It is important to note that this initial sorting is simply an organizational strategy to manage the data. These categories may or may not have been used as new categories and headings emerged.

The next step of analysis was a close reading of the uploaded transcripts from the interviews and observations and a review of uploaded documents and video. The use of NVivo to support data analysis offered several important tools that will help organize and code data. NVivo has chart and query tools that were helpful in identifying patterns and themes, which according to Miles and Huberman (1994), is an important part of data analysis in qualitative studies (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Wolcott, 1994).

Further analysis of data was supported using the query tool of NVivo. This analysis included displaying findings by organizing data in tables, highlighting findings by examining specific information, and connecting the findings back to the conceptual framework for the study (Wolcott, 1994). Member checks were also used during data analysis to verify the accuracy of the data. These strategies of analysis aided in the interpretation of the data.

When data analysis and the follow up interviews were complete the participant's role in the study concluded. Participants were thanked again, debriefed, and released

from the study through a brief final phone call. The primary purpose of the debriefing

was to allow participants the opportunity to talk about their experiences in the study and

to ensure they were not harmed in any way as a result of the study (Johnson &

Christensen, 2008). Additional follow up will occur after the dissertation process is

complete and the dissertation has been published participants will be offered access to the

results of the study.

Threats to Quality

Miles and Huberman (1994) stated that quality, honesty, trustworthiness, and

authenticity are the earmarks of a good qualitative study. Although this researcher and

this study embrace these principles, Ranz-Smith (2007) identified several factors as being

threats to quality: "The limited number of participants and the limited quantity of

encounters" and bias on the part of the researcher also being a teacher (p.298). This

study has potential pitfalls in all three of these areas.

First, there is the objectivity that has to do with bias. Looking for integrity in

analysis by examining whether biases have shaped data collection or analysis is one way

to help ensure objectivity. As a preschool teacher and former kindergarten teacher, I

brought assumptions and biases to this study related to the importance of play. This was

definitely something I was aware of when I am doing interviews and observations.

Triangulation through the use of multiple data sources can help validate data and

combat biases. In this study there will be many sources of data. One weakness is that I

was the creator of the interview questions and served as the interviewer. I did the coding

and analysis, which as Maxwell (2005) points out, means these instruments and data

could all have the same bias. One coder also means there could be reliability issues. One technique for addressing intra-coder reliability is to code the data twice during two different sessions on separate occasions (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). This second coding session will help ensure there is consistency across codes. One way of addressing bias in the data collection tools was the use of four peers to review the data collection tools used in the study. Another way of addressing this is through the collection of documents from each classroom. The documents collected, which include daily schedules, curriculum plans, and other materials offered by participants, were not be created by the researcher. They were created by the teacher or administrator of the early childhood program and therefore did not have researcher bias.

Patton (2002) stated the importance of rigor by increasing the quality of data collection in the field and being open to pattern recognition. In the process of interviews, I revised the data collection tool while doing field work to get the best possible data. Member checking and expert audit review helped ensure the reliability of the study methods (Patton, 2002).

It was possible in the process of collecting and analyzing data that there would be discrepant data. Though discrepant data did not occur I was prepared to double check to make sure data were coded and analyzed properly. If the discrepancy still existed, I planned to confer with participants to clarify the nature of the discrepancy (Creswell, 2007). If a discrepancy remained after conferring with participants, the discrepant data would have been reported as such. Maxwell (2005) advised that it may be better to allow readers to draw their own conclusions about discrepant data rather than to ignore it.

The last threat to quality was one this researcher had no control over. Throughout this study was an assumption that early childhood teachers would be willing to participate and to allow access to their classrooms and their data. The purposeful, conceptually driven sampling methods used could have unraveled, for example: If no teachers from high quality early childhood programs in the region the study is being conducted in were willing to participate in the study, this lack of participation would have removed this concept of the quality approach from the study. This was not a threat this researcher had control over. It could have had an impact on the sample size. A smaller number of early childhood teachers willing to participate, or participation from less experienced teachers from lower quality programs could have changed the direction of the study. Luckily, these threats to quality did not arise.

Feasibility

The choice of a small sample size of six participants provided a reasonable context for a case study. A small sample size also allowed for detailed in-depth analysis of several data sources, which fit within the parameters of a case study. Limiting the data sources to three added to the feasibility of this study by not producing so much data that the study became unwieldy and could not be completed in a reasonable amount of time.

Generalization and Transferability

Many of the issues and strategies addressed in this section also address validity. Addressing the issues and strategies related to validity help ensure the accuracy of the findings of the study (Creswell, 2009). Generalization and transferability are another aspect of validity that refer to the ability to apply the research to other settings (Creswell,

2009). These issues are more complex in qualitative research, especially case studies. Part of the rationale for choosing a case study in this instance was to use the data to develop thick rich descriptions of themes and patterns within a specific context, which can seem counterproductive to generalization or transferability. This study included multiple cases, by studying multiple cases the results should be able to be generalized or transferred to some degree (Yin, 2003).

Ethical Issues

There were several ethical issues to consider regarding this study. As a researcher, my first ethical responsibility was to the well-being of the participants in my study. Second, my responsibility was to the portrayal of the data in the most truthful accurate manner as possible. The other ethical responsibility the researcher has to the data is to protect the data. The first and primary responsibility is to the participants of the study.

In considering ethical treatment of the participants of the study, disclosure, understanding, voluntariness, competence, and consent are the important issues that were dealt with. Participants were informed in detail of the purpose of the research and procedures that would be used to collect data, and they were ensured of their confidentiality. Participants were also be informed of possible risks and possible benefits of participating in the study. I made sure each participant fully understood what was explained and had a chance to ask questions. It was also made clear to participants that their participation in the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Participants were competent to give their consent. Consent

was formally determined through each participant's oral consent or signature on a

consent form.

These forms and other physical data were protected. Physical data were kept in a

small locked file cabinet. Transcribed interviews and field notes and all data pertaining

to the study were kept on a flash drive in the same locked cabinet. The researcher's

personal computer was the only one that was used for the study. Review and approval by

the Walden Institutional Review Board (IRB) helped ensure any other ethical issues

concerning this study were addressed. The study did not commence until the Walden IRB

has reviewed the proposal, various permissions needed, and granted approval to begin

collecting data.

Summary

The design of this study was to support a better understanding of the phenomenon

of early childhood teachers' beliefs and perceptions of play. The data gathered in the

study was used to create a better understanding of early childhood teachers' beliefs about

play and how those beliefs are connected with their teaching practices. Experienced early

childhood teachers from high quality programs in New England were the subjects of the

study. They were interviewed using face-to-face structured interviews. They were

observed practicing in their classrooms, and documents from each of their six classrooms

were analyzed.

This study added to the field of knowledge concerning early childhood teacher

beliefs about play and teacher practices and perhaps support the inclusion of more play in

early childhood classrooms. Chapter 4 will present an in-depth description of the study.

Topics will include data collection, data analysis, and trustworthiness. Chapter 4 will also offer a summary of the results of the study.

Chapter 4: Results

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study of multiple cases was to explore the connection between early childhood teachers' beliefs about play and their practices in their early childhood classrooms. The decline of play in early childhood classrooms is an established trend. One reason for this could be due to a lack of connection between what early childhood teachers believe and what they practice in their classroom. Lave's (1988) situated learning theory formed the conceptual framework for this study. The notion of the early childhood classroom as a community of practice recognizes that learning is social, not an isolated process. The main activity for learning considered in this study is play. Data were connected through in-depth interviews, classroom observations, document analysis, and follow-up interviews to answer the question: How do early childhood teachers' beliefs about and dispositions toward play connect with their practice in the classroom? I analyzed the data to provide further understanding of the relationship between teachers' beliefs regarding play and their teaching practices. This chapter will describe the setting for the study, the recruitment of participants, the process of data collection, and the analysis of data as connected to the central research question and four subquestions. Evidence of quality and discrepant information will also be discussed.

Data Collection

Sampling

Purposeful sampling was used to find study participants. Six early childhood teachers in New England were recruited for the study from programs achieving the

highest rating of their state's Quality Rating Incentive System (QRIS) or from schools

with top ratings. Teachers also were required to have a credential relating to the field of

early childhood and have at least 3 years of teaching experience.

Participants

I used the Internet to find elementary schools with high ratings according to their

state standings, national test scores, and that housed kindergarten or preschool programs.

I used State websites to find early childhood programs achieving the highest levels of

their QRIS systems. I sent letters to the principals or directors of 87 of these programs to

gain their support as a community partner and to gain permission to conduct research

with interested teachers in early childhood classrooms. Seven programs or schools

provided a letter of cooperation signed by the principal or director.

These letters were sent to Walden University's IRB; once approval was given by

the IRB (approval # 08-13-13-0129024), principals and directors provided me with

contact information of possible teacher participants. I contacted teachers to discuss their

qualifications and their interest in and availability to participate in the study. As teachers

responded to me via e-mail or telephone, I made follow-up calls and sent follow-up e-

mails to arrange a time and place for discussion about the study, signing an informed

consent form, and conducting the initial interview. At the time of the initial interview

classroom observations and follow-up interviews were scheduled. This was an ongoing

process for 8 weeks.

Six teachers were recruited one from each of the six community partners. I began

interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. One teacher dropped out of

the study during the 8-week period. I recruited a new community partner, gained IRB

approval for the new partner and added a new teacher participant. At the beginning of

the first face-to-face meeting with each participant, which was for the initial interview, all

participants agreed to sign the informed consent form and all participants gave verbal

permission for me to audio tape the initial interview session, and five teachers gave

verbal permission for me to audio tape the follow-up interviews.

I planned to interview, observe, and collect documents from six early childhood

teachers, and was successful in this. Six teacher participants provided me with an initial

interview, a classroom observation, and a follow-up interview. Six teacher participants

provided me with a classroom schedule to analyze while only four teachers provided me

with curriculum plans. Two teachers provided me with curriculum plans from multiple

weeks and one teacher provided me with a list of themes for the year. The figures below

provide demographic information about the participants in the study. Figure 1 shows the

credentials of the participants in the study, Figure 2 shows years of teaching experience

participants had, and Figure 3 shows types of programs participants taught in.

Early Childhood Credential
CDA
1
Bachelor's Degree in Progress
2
Bachelor's Degree
1
Master's Degree
2

Figure 1. Teacher credentials.

Years of Teaching Experience
Less than 10 years
0
Between 10 and 20 years
2
Between 20 and 30 years
2
More than 30 years
2

Figure 2. Years of teaching experience.

Type of Early Childhood Program
Parent cooperative half day pre-school
1
Non-Profit full day child care
(one providing wrap around services)
2
Private for profit full day child care
1
Public school based program (one half day
preschool, one full day kindergarten)
2

Figure 3. Type of early childhood program.

Process

In a 10-week period, I conducted six initial interviews lasting approximately 1

hour each, conducted six classroom observations lasting a minimum of 2.5 hours each,

analyzed 16 documents, and conducted six follow-up interviews lasting between 15 and

30 minutes each. The first interviews were conducted at a location of the participant's

choice. Four participants chose to be interviewed at their workplace and two chose to be

interviewed at a restaurant. Classroom observations were conducted in each of the

participant's classroom on a day and at a time of their choosing. Five follow-up interviews were conducted by telephone the sixth follow-up interview was conducted via email.

I audio taped and transcribed each of the six initial interviews and the five follow-up interviews conducted over the telephone using a digital recorder. I kept a field journal and listened to each interview before I conducted the classroom observation. When available, classroom schedules and curriculum plans were analyzed prior to the classroom observation. I engaged in member-checks during the initial and follow-up interviews to discuss my understanding of teachers' perspectives and beliefs. I stored paper data in a locked file cabinet and electronic data on a password protected personal laptop computer that is used by me exclusively. Audio files and word documents were stored in NVivo.

I chose to conduct interviews, document analysis, and classroom observations to provide thick, rich data offering a well-rounded picture of each early childhood teacher's beliefs about play and their practices in the classroom. I developed a list of interview questions to use in the initial interviews (Appendix A), a list of criteria for use during the classroom observation (Appendix B), and a list of criteria for use during document analysis (Appendix C). Questions for follow-up interviews were developed based on the data collected during initial interview, the classroom observation, and document analysis. As an interviewer, this allowed me to follow themes, threads, and subjects as they arose.

I added the same three questions to each of the follow-up interviews. I realized after my first interview that participants may not share my definition of play so I asked each participant to provide their definition of play, to describe a memorable play scenario

that they either witnessed or were engaged in, and to talk about the available supports in their teaching and learning community for their practice as teachers.

Data Analysis

I listened to each audio tape after the initial interviews and before the classroom observation, as the first step of analysis. When I was able to do so I also transcribed the initial interviews before the classroom observations occurred. During each classroom observation I used the criteria for observation and created field notes. At the conclusion of each classroom observation I created a chart of the data collected and transcribed my field notes. This was the second step of analysis. As the third step of analysis documents collected were examined using the criteria developed (Appendix C). Upon conclusion of each of the six follow-up interviews, I transcribed each one as the fourth step of analysis.

Transcription of interviews and field notes from interviews and classroom observations allowed for close reading of the thick descriptions provided and themes developed. During the process of these first four steps of analysis, I took notes in my journal as I looked closely at emerging themes and patterns. In the next step of analysis, I used the software NVivo to support the coding of data. To provide focus for the analysis of the data I created nodes connected to the study's central research question and subquestions. I also conducted text queries within NVivo to support the clarification of themes and patterns. Text queries were used to help identify important statements by the participants that supported a deeper understanding of their beliefs and practices regarding play.

Codes, categories, and major themes emerged during the data during analysis. Many codes, categories, and themes were connected to play. Play and learning, play and curriculum, opportunity for play, attitudes toward play, changing attitudes toward play, definitions of play, barriers to play, lack of play, play memories, and play experiences of participants.   Other codes, categories, and themes were connected to teachers' beliefs. These included; teacher beliefs, teacher attitudes, teacher influences, mothers, parents, parenting, training, mentors, instructors, support, communities of practice, children, and childhood experiences. The last set of codes, categories, and themes were connected to curriculum, the classroom, and teaching practices. These included play based, emergent, children's interests, child centered, flexibility, instruction, academic(s), direct instruction, teacher directed, tasks, activities, lesson plans, skills, concepts, learning styles, development (social, emotional, cognitive, language, and physical), assessment, standards, role of the teacher, interaction, exploration, engage, classroom climate, structure, choice time, free time, open time, group, individual, circle time, group time, meeting time, community, environment, materials, interest areas, outside, fine motor, large motor, gross motor, music. These will be discussed in further detail in relationship to each of the subquestions of the study and in relationship the central research question.

Findings

Interviews, classroom observations, classroom schedules, and curriculum plans from six early childhood teachers provided rich data for exploring this study's central question and subquestions. This initial discussion of findings will begin with the subquestions and wrap up with discussion of the central question of the study.

Subquestion #1. Subquestion #1 asked, **"**What are teacher's current beliefs, perceptions, or dispositions toward play?" Through interview questions all teachers expressed strong ideas on the subject of their beliefs regarding the importance of play. All participants offered a viewpoint suggesting play does or should have an important place in early childhood classrooms. Four participants stated their belief in a direct connection between play and learning using the direct statement "children learn through play" when asked the interview question: How do you think children learn best? Four of them also indicated the centrality of play to their classrooms and work with children using the following language to describe the place of play; "backbone," "everywhere," "the driver," and "a central ingredient." Two teachers made the statement that "children need play."

In addition to having a role in early childhood classrooms participants described an attitude or state related to play. One participant described play as "a state of homeostasis, which we leave periodically to do other things." A second participant said "play is how they (children) understand things," a third participant described play as "the way they make sense of their world." Two replied that "play is about doing." One teacher stated that in play children use "interactions with each other and learn through trial and error experiences with materials, learning through being and doing."

In describing play as related to their beliefs three teachers offered responses about the importance of children having the opportunity to interact with each other. One teacher said play was what supported children's social emotional development. Another teacher described children's interactions with each other through play as something that

"prepares them to be part of a community." And another teacher spoke about children's experiences with each other in play "helping them to manage their own behavior."

Another common theme in their answer to the interview questions: What are your views on play? Has this view changed? and How have your experiences as an early childhood teacher influenced your beliefs about play? indicated that they view play as having changed more than their beliefs having changed. Three teachers specified that they believe there is less opportunity for children to play both inside and outside the classroom now. Two of the three teachers said that because of children having less opportunity to play they perceive children "don't know how to play" and "don't have the skills to play." One of the three said that in spite of that she believes she still has more play in her class than many early childhood teachers. Two teachers responded that they value play more now, one said, "I used to think play was just play, but the longer I teach the more I see the value of play and how much children learn while they are in it." Another teacher reported that her years in teaching have helped "crystalize" her beliefs and thinking about play. Two teachers described feeling as though they need to "fight" for play, to "defend" their use of play and children's "right" to play.

In summary, Subquestion #1 was answered through data collected through interview questions. The responses of participants related to their beliefs regarding play would seem to indicate that all teachers included in the study value play. Two thirds of them share the viewpoint that there is a connection between play and learning and that play is central to their work in the classroom with young children. Half of them believe

that the role of play and attitudes toward play seem to be changing with less opportunity for play.

Subquestion #2. Subquestion #2 asked, "What influences shaped teachers' beliefs (training, mentor, parents)?" This question was answered through the following initial interview questions: If there were other experiences or people that helped prepare you in your work with young children would you share a little bit about them? What influences have shaped your beliefs in regard to teaching young children? Are there some influences that have been more powerful, or seemed to carry more weight than others? If so what influences have shaped the change in your point of view? To answer this question and connect back to the framework of the study I also asked participants to talk about their community of practice and supports to their teaching practice during each of their follow-up interviews.

All participants in the study indicated their childhood experiences were important in shaping their beliefs and attitudes toward play. Four of them talked about play during their own childhoods and shared experiences of extended outdoor play in their neighborhoods with other neighborhood children and little adult intervention or supervision. Two of them used the word "freedom" when describing those experiences. These descriptions were permeated with a sense of nostalgia (sighs and faraway expressions were observed as participants recalled these experiences) with three of the participants stating "that doesn't happen anymore."

Five of the teachers expressed the important influence of their mother in shaping their beliefs. The mothers of four of these teachers were connected to the field of early

childhood education. Two participant's mothers were teachers in Head Start programs, another was a nursery school teacher and the fourth one ran a family home child care program. Another common theme was that four of the members of the study reported doing lots of babysitting when very young and spending a lot of time "looking after" younger siblings or neighborhood children. Three teachers also reported the experience of becoming parents themselves as strongly influencing their beliefs regarding the importance of play. Participants said, "it changed everything," "you see things up close and personal," and "you see the process and the role of play in their lives as they grow and move forward."

Another mentor important in shaping and influencing teachers' beliefs shared by four participants was a college course instructor. Three of the four participants reported maintaining ongoing relationships with these mentors over time, yet only two of them viewed the actual training they received as being significant to shaping and influencing their beliefs and practices. Two teachers stated that reading influenced their thinking and both reported reading works by Vygotsky, works about Reggio Emilia, works about play, and NAEYC publications. One also reported reading works, by Dewey, Greenspan, and Gussin-Paley.

In regard to training specific to play or play theory only two participants reported doing coursework specific to play. One of those participants said even though she received training about play she felt like she learned more from her colleagues and experiences. Three other participants indicated that their experiences in the field taught them about play and also mentioned supportive colleagues.

The influence and importance of colleagues was echoed in participant's responses to the questions about their communities of practice. All of the teachers in the study identified their colleagues and co-workers as important members of their community of practice. Two included their program director as an important ally, mentor, and/or member of their community of practice.

Most teachers had an informal or unstructured community, but one participant hosted regular meetings of a group of teachers from her school at her home for two years to explore and collaborate about their practice. This group included several teachers, not just those in her classroom. Two participants reported monthly meetings with team members specific to talking about and improving their practice. Another participant reported after reflecting on this question that she would like to establish a more organized way for colleagues and co-workers to gather and discuss their practice.

All participants including the teachers with a more organized structure for connecting with colleagues indicted a desire for even more opportunity for developing a more defined community of practice and vehicle to connect with each other. Two teachers suggested this might be a vehicle for improving program quality and decreasing staff turnover. One teacher suggested this might be a good vehicle for mentoring and educating others about the importance of play and the benefits of play because "play is where it is at and play is the most important thing." Four teachers saw themselves in the role of mentors in relation to their community of practice.

In conclusion, the participants indicated their childhood, childhood experiences, mothers, and experience as parents were the most important influences in shaping and

influencing their beliefs. Training and coursework appeared to have a smaller influence, but instructors, colleagues, and coworkers all played an important role in shaping and continuing to shape and influence study participant's beliefs.

Subquestion #3. Subquestion #3 asked, "How are teachers' beliefs regarding play and teaching practices, instructional models, and curriculum choices in the classroom related?" This question was explored through the initial interviews, classroom observations, field notes and analysis of schedules and curriculum plans. Findings connected to beliefs about play and approaches to curriculum will be discussed first. Beliefs regarding play and instructional models will be discussed next concluding with findings connected to teaching practices and play.

In their approach to curriculum the idea of basing a curriculum on the interest of the children came up from all of the teachers. Teacher's discussed "building curriculum around what the children's interests are," "letting children take the lead," "letting children run with ideas," "diving into children's ideas," "going with children's interests," and "working on what is interesting to them." Five teachers followed this by talking about play based curriculum as part of their approach to curriculum, curriculum planning, and classroom practices. One of the five teachers described the importance of this approach as "allowing children the freedom to work on their own goals."

Four teachers identified their approach to a curriculum as using an emergent curriculum model. The teachers who discussed emergent curriculum also incorporated teacher derived themes or ideas. Two teachers talked about using emergent curriculum, but bringing their own interests and ideas to curriculum as well. Another teacher

followed this idea stating, "It is a balance you have to draw them in with what they are interested in, but you also have to lead them to places they don't even know exist." The fourth teacher said through emergent curriculum teachers "present their ideas, but the children can take them, change them, and run with them in a different direction."

All participants stated that they had a written curriculum plan that was followed daily. Five of the teachers made their written curriculum plans available for study. The curriculum plans of the four teachers using an emergent curriculum approach indicated some flexibility. One of the teachers described her curriculum plan as "a soft agenda." She said, "We have a plan, but we do make room for the children lead us where they want to go." Three of the curriculum plans analyzed had flexibility for various activities built in through use of terms like "either, or" with two options, or "children will choose…" (with options provided).

One instructional model closely connected to play, the emergent curriculum, has already been considered. Other instructional models and practices also came up during interviews, observations, and analysis of curriculum plans. Two teachers discussed the use of social cognition as part of their approach to curriculum. One teacher using this approach described the important role social thinking has in helping children "process their social engagements as well as what they are thinking and learning." The second teacher described this as the way that children are able to "put it all together (their thinking and learning)." One teacher also brought up the responsive classroom. She viewed this model as going hand in hand with social cognition.

Teachers talked about their teaching practices in relationship to play during the initial interviews. Four teachers indicated that they use play as part of their teaching practices. This was also observed during four classroom observations and clearly connected to what teachers stated in the initial interviews. The four teachers using play as part of their teaching practice indicated this was a more appropriate way to introduce or teach academic concepts. One teacher said, "When I approach academic concepts (like math) through play they come about it in a very natural way." Another teacher said, "I try to teach everything in as playful a way as possible, and give children as much time for play as possible." The third teacher stated, "When we want to support literacy, science, and that sort of thing we do it through play because the more open ended activities like building with blocks offer the most opportunity for learning."

Members in the study used the following words; "guide," "tour guide," and "facilitator" to describe their role during interviews. Another teacher viewed her role as a cheerleader and cheering section as being an important support for children. Three teachers indicated the importance of supporting social emotional development through "building community," "fostering relationships," and "promoting cooperation." One teacher stated, "I value the social emotional aspect of their learning. It is great if they get to kindergarten and they know their letters, but if they can't be in a group with other children, maneuver as a group with other children, get along, take turns, then knowing letters is not really going to get them very far."

Two teachers talked about the importance of children feeling "physically and emotionally safe" indicating this has to come before any real learning can occur. Four

teachers discussed the importance of being consistent with rules and expectations. Two teachers indicated attending to and understanding individual children's strengths and learning styles is an important aspect of their role. Two teachers described their belief in the importance of direct instruction. One teacher said, "I provide targeted information and a targeted starting point." Another teacher stated, "I believe children need to be explicitly taught certain things. We assume that children are just going to pick up on these things, but they don't."

In their answers to questions regarding teaching practices and play two members in the study reported using play/choice time as the time to pull individual children out for direct instruction. Three teachers mentioned the environment, one teacher said it is important to "create an environment that has enough without being overwhelming" another teacher said "making sure there are enough choices" is important and the third teacher said; "different levels of materials need to be provided to make sure children are challenged enough and so their learning can be scaffolded." A second teacher mentioned the importance of the adult providing scaffolding for children's learning both as part of the environment and as part of her teaching practices.

In summary, all teachers in the study expressed a belief in supporting and reflecting the children's interests through curriculum. Five members of the study indicated the use of a play based approach to curriculum. In addition to a play based curriculum an emergent curriculum approach appeared to be favored among teachers using a play based model. Four the teachers in the study indicated that they used play as part of their daily teaching practices. Three teachers in the study reported the belief that

creating a rich environment was an important part of their role as teachers. Data from observations, and analysis of curriculum plans (when provided) supported data collected from initial interviews

       Subquestion #4. Subquestion #4 asked, "How do teachers perceive the role of play in early childhood classrooms?" The data to analyze this subquestion came mainly from initial interviews. Five teachers stated a clear role for play in their classrooms in their answer to the question; what role, if any, does play have in the daily life of your classroom? At the same time they provided an answer they also offered a statement about the role of play in their classrooms. One teacher said, "I think children learn through play, but I think play is endangered." The second teacher stated, "Children learn through play. Play is play and play is fun, but there is so much learning going on there too." The response of the third teacher was, "Play is critical to learning. It is their job it is what they do. Even children in programs with play-based curriculum go off to kindergarten and are successful. They can learn the skills they need through play." Another teacher offered a similar answer and said, "I think play is the basis of all learning, and what is more fun than that." One teacher indicated the role of play in the classroom was to "make learning fun in a way the children can access the information you are providing."

       I asked teachers to elaborate on their answers. One participant said that she used play to "try to help children understand their thinking." Another said she tried to teach in a "playful" using games and offering lots of choices. A third teacher 's answer connected back to creating curriculum around children's interests, "Children need play and you

build your curriculum around what their interests are." One teacher described how she used play to connect with and support skills she introduced during direct instruction.

So like if we are working on classifying as a group during group time at our meeting where we do a lot of what might be classified as academics I would have materials for sorting available so later I could remind them of how we were talking about things in groups and what makes a group, what makes them the same. Let's see what we can do with these materials. So I keep trying to figure out how to break down those foundational skills and provide opportunities for children to work on those foundational skills.

Three teachers talked about incorporating academic concepts into children's interests as part of play. One teacher said, "You can't just push your own agenda." The second teacher said, "If we don't go with children's interests then they don't care about what we are trying to teach them. If we do follow what they are interested in they are engaged and interested in what they are doing."

Four members of the study mentioned the pressure for teaching more academics. Two of these participants taught in programs connected to public schools. One voiced displeasure at having to do some of the same things over and over year after year related to assessment. One stated,

Unfortunately we do have to add in these crazy expectations that the powers that be are putting over on us. We are forced to do so many things. I believe firmly in the zone of proximal development, but I believe we are trying to push kids way before they are in the zone. We are supposed to have a ninety minute literacy

block. And I know lots of people who do it. We are also supposed to cover teen

numbers and money. I could drill some stuff, but I'm not going to do it.

In answer to the question: When flexibility is required what are the parts of the

typical day you are most reluctant to change or let go of? Four teachers said they would

not be flexible with meal or snack times. Four teachers answered that circle/meeting time

was something they were not willing to let go of. One teacher said she would not give up

play and another teacher offered a similar answer stating she would not give up open

choice time. One teacher said she would be reluctant to give up outside time a second

teacher said maybe she would give up outside time.

In conclusion, five teachers indicated their belief in having an important role for

play in their classroom. All five teachers made a connection between play and learning.

Four of these teachers indicted using play as a vehicle for teaching skills and concepts.

Though these five teachers stated a belief in a role for play in the daily life of their

classroom only two teachers indicated they would not want to give it up when flexibility

in the schedule was required. This seems to be connected to the central research

question.

Central research question. The central research question asked, "How do early

childhood teachers' beliefs about and dispositions toward play connect with their

practices in the classroom?" Multiple sources of data were analyzed to explore this

question. I will begin with statements from each teacher about their perception of this

connection obtained during the initial interview. The findings from the analysis of

schedules and curriculum plans will be presented next, with data from observations. To

conclude I will present what teachers viewed as supports and barriers to play in early childhood classrooms.

All teachers indicated they perceived a strong connection between their beliefs and practices. Three teachers used the word "strong" to describe this connection. A fourth teacher used the word "intertwined." One teacher said "absolutely" when asked if there was a connection. Another said, "They mesh really well." And the last teacher said this is something she strives for, but isn't sure she is 100% there. She said, "It is like a learning curve all the time. I try to bring my beliefs about play and how important it is into my teaching and I think most of the time they connect." One teacher felt so strongly about the importance of this connection that she stated,

> I couldn't do this work if my beliefs and practices were compromised, but I will admit that I did it in the past because I was naive, but at this point I couldn't do it. I am more mature in ty thinking and adamant about what I am doing. I am going to be a strong advocate for play and I am not going to back down on that anymore.

In the initial interviews teachers quantified part of their answers to the questions: Please describe what a typical day in your classroom is like. Which experiences are more teacher directed and which experiences are more child-centered or child-directed? What, if any areas of the day do children have time and space to set their own goals and follow their own agenda? Teachers offered a breakdown of time spent in play, or self-selected activities versus time spent in teacher directed activities. Three teachers said this was 50/50 and used words like "balance," "choice," and "flexible" in describing how this

worked. Another teacher said 90/10 with more time being child directed. One teacher said 60/40 with more of the time being child directed. One teacher said 75/25 with more time being teacher directed.

Through analysis of schedules, curriculum plans, and classroom observations opportunities for hands on learning occurred in periods a day lasting between 45 minutes and 6.5 hours where children were offered time to play with and manipulate materials to help develop an understanding of concepts learned. The data collected during the classroom observations closely matched what was reported in the schedule and indicated in the curriculum plan.

According to classroom schedules and curriculum plans all classrooms offered time for children to engage in cooperative learning where students could collaborate in groups on completing an assigned task. Though not all teachers assigned specific tasks, all teachers did provide teacher initiated or guided activities. The data collected during the classroom observations about curriculum closely matched what was reported in the schedule and indicated in the curriculum plan.

All teachers indicated that they utilized different settings within and outside of the classroom to deliver instruction. In schedules and curriculum plans outdoors was the most prevalent secondary venue with three classrooms engaging in more than one outside period daily, three classrooms had access to indoor spaces for large motor play for inclement weather, one program offered the opportunity for children to move between classrooms, and one classroom had weekly specials that children would leave the classroom for. Through observation two classrooms utilized these settings with the same

amount of time and frequency as stated in schedules and curriculum plans, but the other classrooms utilized these settings much less than what was reported.

Time scheduled for teacher directed instruction occurred mainly during whole group experiences like circle/meeting time. Lessons often focused on a specific learning objective involving a skill – e.g. counting, rhyming, reciting the alphabet. In two classrooms the length of this time was the same as what was reported in the schedule. Four classrooms had significantly longer meeting times running between 15 minutes and 30 minutes longer than times reported on the schedule. One preschool teacher held a one hour meeting time.

All teachers were observed interacting and engaging with children on their own level. Teachers used language familiar to young children, helped describe feelings, made eye contact, and helped solved problems. All teachers were observed smiling and laughing while engaging with children. Teachers were often observed sitting in small chairs or kneeling at small tables with groups of children, and teachers were often observed sitting on couches, cushions, or on the floor with children.

The word play did not occur in any classroom schedules or curriculum plans. To gage how much time was scheduled for play when teachers used the language choice, open, or free in their description of a block of time it was counted as play. All classrooms had time for this in their schedule. In two classrooms play was observed for significantly less time than it was scheduled for (approximately a half hour less). Play was scheduled for between 45 minutes and 3.5 hours. In all classrooms time for play as a learning activity was scheduled, though the word play was not used to describe it. Where

teachers used the language, learning centers, interest areas, bucket time, co-op time, curriculum choice time, or center time it was counted as time for learning through play. Learning through play was observed as scheduled, which was on average less than an hour. In two classrooms there was flexibility in the schedule to allow children to self-select even during more structured times and activities.

Teachers were observed engaging in play with children by taking a role, offering props, extending a play experience, talking with children about their play, engaging in two way conversations about play, and supporting children using materials. In two classrooms this was observed often. Three teachers supported play in all of the ways described. In one classroom the teacher supported dramatic hospital/doctor play by adding clipboards for the nurse to record information on. She later entered the play as a patient. She turned to me as an aside and stated, "I am trying to get their play to a more mature level, by helping them understand their roles." Another teacher supported and extended block play by offering play props, engaging children in conversation about their structures, and encouraging cooperation. In one classroom the teacher engaged in play, but more as a play manager. In dramatic play she chose props for the children to use from what was available and passed them out instead of allowing children to select their own props from what was available. In two classrooms teachers were not observed engaging in play at all. During the time scheduled for play the teacher was observed working with individual children while their assistant managed the play of the rest of the group. Further findings related to dramatic play show that it was only present in two

curriculum plans. In two preschool classrooms an interest area for dramatic play did not exist and in another classroom it was closed.

Time for fine motor activities like drawing, painting, writing and cutting that need a lot of small muscle control and eye hand coordination was included in every classroom schedule and in two curriculum plans. Drawing, writing, and cutting were often observed in every classroom. Painting was only available in one classroom.

Large motor activities like walking, running, and jumping that need large muscle control and balance and coordination were part of every classroom schedule and part of three curriculum plans, in all cases this was connected to outdoor time or an outdoor activity (a walk). Four classrooms were observed having significantly less large motor time than what was indicated on their schedules. In two classrooms a whole outdoor period was eliminated (this did not appear to be weather related).

Novel activities planned by the teacher to challenge them to try new things were noted in only three curriculum plans. Novel activities were observed in three classrooms. One classroom offered several novel activities centering on the theme of dinosaurs. Another classroom offered a novel science experiment involving polar bears. A third classroom had a woodworking/sculpture building center set up with small hand tools for children to use.

Games for fun or as teaching tools were observed in use in two classrooms. They were part of three curriculum plans.

Music used to engage and motivate students in all areas of learning (singing, music for transition, relaxation, to remember information) appeared in two classroom

schedules and two curriculum plans. Two teachers were observed using music beyond singing one to three songs during meeting time. Both teachers used music to signal transitions and used music during clean-up time. One of these teachers also used a sing song chant to help support a lesson on patterning.

During their initial interviews three teachers stated that the environment is an important factor in supporting play. In all classrooms there was a variety of open-ended materials available for children to self-select, and teachers purposed the classroom with the following materials for use by children. Tools to collect or act on information like things used for measuring, recording, cutting, and joining. Items designated as tools could include; clipboards, tape measures, glue, compasses, or digital cameras. Information sources to offer data about interests of the child or the curriculum at hand that might include charts, models, reference books, nature specimens, or labels were available in all classrooms. Containers used for mixing carrying, or storing work in progress were available in four classrooms. Containers included egg cartons, pails, cardboard boxes, and plastic bags. Work spaces are places for children to work in groups were present in all classrooms. Individual spaces to work were observed in four classrooms. Work spaces included conventional tables, chairs, and desks or non-conventional floor spaces, mats, cushions, or spaces under tables. Display facilities for sharing work like empty tables, stands, bulletin board, racks, or window ledges were available and in use in all classrooms.

Another aspect of the classroom environment to support play is a variety of interest areas or centers. These centers include blocks, books, sensory, dramatic play,

art/painting, writing, manipulatives (table toys), and science. Blocks were present and observed in use in all classrooms. Books were present and observed in use in all classrooms. A sensory table was present in each classroom, it was observed open and active in only one classroom. In other classrooms it appeared to be used as storage or was empty. Four classrooms had dramatic play centers, in two preschool classrooms it did not exist and in one classroom it was closed. All classrooms had provisions for art/painting, but in four classrooms that area was closed. Writing centers and manipulatives were observed in use in all classrooms. Science as an interest area was present in all classrooms. In some classrooms the science center was a table, in some classrooms it was a shelf. It was only observed in use in one classroom. In one classroom all of these elements were present and all of them were open and available. In one classroom all elements were present, but one was closed. In one classroom all elements were present, but two were closed. In one classroom all elements were present, but three were closed. In two classrooms two elements were missing, one was closed, and one was open, but not used.

Three members of the study stated that the environment was an important element in supporting play. Two teachers said having parent helpers in the classroom helped to support play. Two teachers also mentioned their assistants or co-workers, and that it is helpful if those staff members share and support the teacher's views. Two teachers replied that the length of time they have been in the field supports them in putting their beliefs about play into practice. One teacher stated, "If I were in a different school it would be different. If I were a new teacher it would be different. I have respectability

and history." She also mentioned her principal as being an important support and ally for play. Another teacher said that trusting relationships between children and adults is important to supporting play.

Four participants in the study indicated the pressure to include more academics in the early childhood classroom as a barrier to putting their beliefs about play into practice. They view these pressures as coming from different forces. These four teachers talked about academics and assessment as the have-tos, things as a teacher one has to do. As one teacher put it, "There are things that you are told you have to do or go through – like reading, writing, and arithmetic - that get in the way of play." Three teachers indicated the pressure comes from parents, three teachers stated the pressure comes from having to do so many assessments, and two teachers responded that pressure comes from administration (directors, principals,) and public policy, "No Child Left Behind and Race To The Top those are barriers," stated one teacher. "Pressures over time the push over the last 10 years to go from play based and experiential curriculum to more of a skill and drill curriculum, I feel the eyes on us," stated the other teacher.

"There are things like assessment that can get in the way of play," one teacher stated. Two other teachers also identified assessment as a barrier to play. "We have to do a lot more observation and assessment than we used to. The observations are important, but the assessments can get in the way of play. We try to do the assessments as part of play, but sometimes the way we sneak it in feels forced." The second teacher responded, "It's not that I think assessment and standards are bad. It is what is done with them."

Four teachers viewed parents as a barrier to putting their beliefs about play into practice. One teacher stated, "They really want children to be able to sit and do a task. They want more focus on academics." Another teacher added, "I hate to say it, but I feel like I have to sell parents more on play. It is important to identify the learning for parents and educate parents about play." The third teacher said, "Parents don't always understand what teachers are doing when they let children play." The fourth teacher followed this with "Parents need support and education."

Earlier in the findings teachers indicated the environment can support play in a positive way; three teachers also indicated that environment can be a barrier. One teacher stated, "I have come to realize that space is important and can be a barrier when you have a space that doesn't work or an environment that doesn't have the materials to support play." Another teacher summed this up differently, "Without a good environment and quality space for play you can't have rich play, you only get junky play."

Issues with co-workers or the director were cited by four teachers as barriers to play. One teacher stated, "When you work with others who do not value play, who have really different teaching styles than you do, or who view play differently than you do it can be difficult." The second teacher said, "It can be really hard when staff philosophies don't match up." Another teacher indicated, "If your director has a different view about play than you do it can be difficult especially if the director in that situation is not supportive of change." And the third teacher said, "High staff turnover is a barrier to play – well it's a barrier to everything."

Three teachers responded that they are seeing more children who are not ready for the experience of preschool or kindergarten. One teacher's observation was that the demands of full day kindergarten are difficult for young children. A second teacher reported that she is seeing more children each year who "don't know how to interact with their peers and don't know how to do dramatic play. I want them to think and interact and learn about play, but I have kids now who don't know how to play." The third teacher stated,

Many more children are coming with delays; there may be alcohol abuse in their family, they may have autism, they may have sensory integration issues, speech and language delays, low tone, this may be their first experience in other care, they may have food security issues, or incarcerated parents. These things impact all developmental areas, and are barriers to accessing quality play.

One teacher indicated that she can lose play. She said, "Sometimes the need and pressure to be the classroom manager gets in the way, and I lose the sense of play. I get caught up in the mechanics of running the classroom." Another teacher said, "I think when adults are too involved in the play it changes the play and not always in a good way."

When asked if they wanted to say anything else about play four teachers made comments in defense of play. Here is what they said: "I have seen the effect of what happens with children who are drilled and have to sit and do their letters or numbers. They lose the joy of learning." This was echoed by another teacher, "You know when you do a letter of the week kind of curriculum they don't care about it anymore. I can't

do that now, but I am embarrassed to say there was a time when I did do that." Another

teacher stated, "I will fight tooth and nail if we ever have to take play out of preschool.

Preschool is the appetizer and K-12 is the main course so preschool is just a taste and you

want them to be hungry going forward. I'm afraid that won't happen if we lose play."

And the fourth teacher said, "The reason I became a kindergarten teacher was to protect

play, and it's getting tougher."

In follow-up interviews I asked participants to offer their personal definitions of

play, a definition that they use to guide their work and a description of a memorable play

experience that they observed or were part of.

One teacher said,

Play is self-directed and fun. It doesn't have to be super physical, but passive

play like in video games doesn't seem like play to me. Kids have their own

agenda and their own plan, play unfolds spontaneously. Kids are practicing and

learning while they do it. You can dovetail with it as a teacher, but you have to

respect it.

She described a play experience where children were industrious. She described children

sharing materials, supporting each other in solving problems. Children were relaxed yet

excited at the same time. The scenario was part of a long investigation of sculpture

where children built a sculpture museum, made tickets and invitations and invited parents

to come.

The second teacher said, "Play is an expression of a child's imagination and the

adults who go along for the ride! I think it's a learning process fueled by experimentation

and being open to all kinds of experiences." She described a play scenario with herself and one child at the sensory table experimenting with a substance. The child noticed the measuring cups were different sizes. He filled counted and dumped into the one cup measuring cup for a long time (the teacher wasn't sure how long, but she said it felt like they were there together for hours) and came away with a rudimentary understanding of fractions on his own.

The third teacher defined play in this way,

Children are very genuine. I find when kids are interested they interact whether they are individual or in group. For me play is having fun it is enjoying what you are doing it is investigating. The kids do that if the kids feel safe in their environment. Children engaged in having fun.

Her description of a play episode involved a child on the autism spectrum. This child had already been in the classroom for a year and had not formed any relationships with other children only her. One interaction in the dramatic play space (which this child had avoided) with another child changed everything for this child and he made his first friend.

The fourth teacher defined play in this way, "My definition of play is: opportunities for children (and adults) to interact with materials and their environment in a manner of their choosing." Her description of a play scenario involved her own children and she observed the younger siblings dependence on their older siblings to initiate play. She observed that play needs an initiator.

The next teacher offered this definition for play,

Play for me is a combination of free spirited exploration mixed with hands on

problem solving. The act of playing with other children or materials allows each

child to reach inside themselves and find their own personal strengths, and

solidify existing skills. Play also opens the door for children to challenge

themselves to learn new skills as well as work through the struggles they may

have, whether this is not knowing how to successfully enter play with peers or not

being able to count to 10. Children were made to play, that is their job at this age.

Play is learning and learning is play. As a teacher we know if provided with

meaningful play experiences and age appropriate materials children walk away

from play with more experience and with lifelong skills that pave a foundation for

their academic future.

For her play episode she described a year with an English language learner and the

amazing progress he made learning English through play, particularly with his favorite

materials.

The last teacher said, "I think of play as being a way to learn so I think children

are playing all the time. I think play can be directed, but it is better when they are

directing the play themselves and it is better if you step back and are just there to move

the play along or help them solve problems."

Evidence of Quality

The purpose of this qualitative case study of multiple cases in six classrooms was

to explore the connection between early childhood teachers' beliefs about play and their

practices in their early childhood classrooms. Several strategies were used to provide

evidence of quality in this study and address credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. A purposeful sampling strategy based on program quality and teacher experience was used to identify participants. I designed tools linked to the central question and subquestions of this study to support the process of interviewing participants and collecting data through observations and analysis of classroom schedules and curriculum plans to insure the same data were collected in each case. The process for collecting data remained consistent from case to case. During interviews and classroom observations I recorded field notes.

I also developed specific interview questions for the initial interviews related to the central question of this study and the four subquestions. These questions were reviewed by three early childhood professionals. Questions for the follow-up interviews arose from an initial analysis of data collected earlier. Participants had control over where and how initial and follow-up interviews occurred for their ease and comfort. Member checks occurred during the initial and follow-up interview. Collecting data from these multiple sources provided an opportunity for triangulation of data. These strategies help to provide evidence of quality and also support the credibility of the study by providing a true picture of the phenomenon.

Some of the same strategies that provide evidence of quality also support the reliability of the study. The study is strengthened by triangulation of data collected from multiple sources. The use of multiple cases added strength to the study. Member checks were used particularly in the follow-up interviews to deepen my understanding of teachers' beliefs and practices as well as to explore emerging themes, and discuss

observed practices. In addition to this I kept a research journal to capture my reflections, record ideas to follow-up on, and account for my bias. The research journal became an important part of my audit trail along with interview transcripts, field notes, analysis of schedules and curriculum plans, and notes on emerging themes and patterns. Enough information is provided from these sources in enough detail to make it possible for other researchers to replicate this study which helps support the dependability of the study.

Though it may be difficult to generalize the results of this small scale qualitative study the results are likely transferable. It is probable that other teachers and teacher researchers reading this study will find connections between this study and their own experiences. It is likely that there are themes that emerged that are common to most teachers particularly those around beliefs, belief systems and influences on those beliefs.

To assist with data analysis I used the qualitative research software tool NVivo. The software supported the development of themes and categories and kept data well-organized. Conducting specific queries with NVivo allowed themes to be developed further. The memo feature of NVivo supported keeping track of my ideas and thinking related to the research experience. The use of NVivo supports the confirmability of the study. Using NVivo for data analysis helped ensure the findings emerged from the data. The process of conducting the study, gathering and analyzing data occurred as proposed in Chapter 3. The only adjustment necessary was recruiting participants from a wider geographic area than originally proposed.

Discrepant Information

The analysis of data exploring early childhood teachers' beliefs about play in regard to their practices did not find any discrepant information. All teachers shared a belief in the value and importance of play in early childhood classrooms. All teachers included play as part of the daily life of their classrooms in some way and for some part of the day. All teachers perceived some level of connection between their beliefs about play and their practices in the classroom. Teachers' childhood experiences, parents, colleagues, and mentors were instrumental in shaping their beliefs.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to present an analysis of data collected from interviews, observations, and analysis of schedules and curriculum plans from early childhood teachers connected with their beliefs and practice regarding play. The analysis of data and findings presented were organized around the subquestions and central research question of this study. In general early childhood teachers indicated a strong belief in play. Teachers articulated a tendency to use children's interests and experiences to provide a play based curriculum, though observational data and document analysis did not always indicate this. And teachers indicated their belief in a strong connection between their beliefs about play and their practices in the classroom, though observations and document analysis did not always indicate this. The chapter also included the strategies used to ensure the quality of the study.

The discussion in Chapter 5 will interpret these findings and connect them with the literature review. Some recently published literature will be added to this discussion.

Based on this discussion, recommendations for the field of early care and education,

suggestions for future research, and implications for social change will be offered.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the connection between early childhood teachers' beliefs about play and their practices in the classroom. Research indicates play makes important contributions to children's learning and development (Erikson, 1977; Ginsburg, 2007; Pellegrini et al., 2007; Piaget, 1969; Vygotsky, 1978). Yet the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) changed the landscape of early care and education and many of these changes negatively affected play in early childhood classrooms (Panksepp, 2007; Patte, 2010; Ranz-Smith, 2007). There is a gap in the literature concerning early childhood teachers' current beliefs about play and how those beliefs are connected to their practices in the classroom.

Chapter 5 contains an interpretation of the findings obtained during this examination of the connection between early childhood teachers' beliefs about play and their practices in the classroom. The analysis of data indicated that teachers perceived a strong connection between their beliefs about play and their practices in the classroom. The evidence showed that this connection was not as strong as teachers perceived it to be. A lack of three important elements of early childhood classrooms; including dramatic play, use of sensory tables, and availability of painting at easels was also noted. This chapter provides an overview of the study, a brief summary of the findings, an interpretation of the findings, implications for social change, recommendations for action and recommendations for further study.

Study Overview

Choosing the qualitative methodology of a case study as the framework for the design of the study provided the opportunity for multiple perspectives around early childhood teachers' beliefs about play and practices in the classroom to emerge. Using the case study as an approach allowed for a rich exploration of the topic using interviews, observations, artifacts, and document analysis. The type of data collected using a case study approach helped to provide an understanding of the correlation of the factors involved in the study and an in-depth way of exploring those factors. Six teachers from six different early childhood classrooms were participants in the study. All six teachers had at least 10 years of teaching experience, held a credential or degree in early childhood or a related field, taught in high quality programs in the New England area and were interested in exploring, sharing, and discussing their views, experiences, and practices around play.

Summary of Findings

The analysis of the data in Chapter 4 indicated that early childhood teachers share a belief in the value of play. All teachers in the study valued play enough to make a place for it in their classrooms on a daily basis. All teachers in the study indicated their belief in a clear connection between play and their practices in the classroom.

Document analysis and teachers' beliefs discerned through interviews indicated a higher level of play occurring daily than classroom observations and field notes indicated. Through classroom observations three common curriculum elements were observed to be missing or seldom used in classrooms. As I examined the data more

closely I realized it was important to consider participant's definitions of play in addition to my own. I realized there was a possibility that participant's beliefs about the level of play occurring might be connected to their definition of play but not to the definition of play offered for this study. As part of follow-up interviews, I asked teachers to share their definitions of play and to describe an important or memorable play experience from their classroom so I could see how their definitions, descriptions, and practices aligned. Teachers also discussed barriers to implementing play in early childhood classrooms and including play in their practices.

Interpretation of Findings

Early childhood teachers participating in this study held a credential related to early childhood, had at least 10 years of teaching experience, and taught at high quality early childhood programs indicated by achieving the highest ranking in their state's QRIS system, NAEYC accreditation, or in the case of programs housed in public schools, a school achieving high state ranking or high test scores according to national standards. This choice was made with the assumption that a selection of experienced educated teachers from these types of high quality programs would have an understanding of play being a part of best practice in early childhood classrooms.

The first part of the data analysis concerned early childhood teachers' beliefs, perceptions, and dispositions toward play. In interviews teachers expressed their beliefs about play. Teachers were asked to touch on the two categories of beliefs identified by Wang et al. (2008). Teachers shared their professional beliefs that come from education, training, and professional development and their informal beliefs that come from their

childhood, life and classroom experiences with children (Wang et al., 2008). All teachers offered a viewpoint suggesting play does or should have an important place in the lives of children and in early childhood classrooms.

Teachers' Shared Definitions of Play

It is important before continuing with the interpretation of findings to compare the teacher's shared definition of play with the researcher's definition of play. In research there is no universally agreed upon definition of play (Sherwood & Reifel, 2010). In order to have a common framework for the discussion of the interpretation and implications of the findings it is important to see how the teachers' shared definition of play and the definition of play used for this study are related to or connected with each other.

In examining teachers' definitions of play the following common elements emerged. Teachers described play as self-directed, fun, connected with learning and used adjectives like imaginative, spirited, industrious, and exploration. All of these adjectives seem to suggest that teachers believe play has an active component. Teachers also said play could be individual or could happen in groups. This vision of play is strongly connected to the definition of play offered in Chapter 1: an essential process (Myck-Wayne, 2010; Pellegrini et al., 2007). It is an enjoyable, creative, minimally scripted exploration, often without a defined ending, in which the participant is totally absorbed and engaged in the experience (Bergen, 2009; Myck- Wayne, 2010; Ortlieb, 2010; Pui-Wah, 2010). Play is not necessarily serious, but players are serious about it (Pui-Wah, 2010). Play can be either an individual or group experience (Ortlieb, 2010). It would

appear that the teachers' shared defintions of play and the researcher's definition of play are closely aligned.

Teacher Beliefs Regarding Play

In their definitions of play and through interviews teachers indicted a belief that there is a connection between play and learning in the cognitive domain and that play is central to their work in the classroom with young children. Teachers talked specifically about the learning in the social emotional domain that is supported through play and offered a belief that children need time opportunities to interact and engage with each other. Teachers further described these opportunities as ways that children further their self-regulation skills and learn to be part of a community. The view teachers shared of the classroom as a community aligns with the researcher's view and the conceptual framework for this study considering the classroom as a community of practice. Play was viewed as something teachers valued. Teachers described a view of changing attitudes toward play and less opportunity for children to play. This also aligns with the research indicating academics are replacing play in classrooms (Fisher et al., 2008; Panksepp, 2007; Patte, 2010; and Ranz-Smith, 2007). This left teachers feeling a need to fight for and defend children's right to play. This would suggest that though teachers value play there are influential others who do not.

Participants shared the important influences on their beliefs about play. All participants in the study described their childhood experiences as being important in shaping their attitudes and beliefs around play. These experiences centered on outdoor play, involved other children, and little adult supervision. Another common early

childhood experience was caring for younger siblings or neighborhood children.

Teachers were nostalgic about these experiences and expressed both an observation and a

concern that children growing up today do not have the same opportunities. Other

important childhood influences were parents. Teachers in the study described the

important influence of their mothers on their beliefs about play. Four of the teachers in

the study had mothers who were connected to the field of early childhood education.

Teachers' descriptions of their childhood experiences about play connect directly to Min

and Lee's (2006) views of play being central to the culture of childhood and children's

lives.

As adults teachers had two common mentors that shaped their beliefs about play.

Teachers discussed college course instructors and colleagues as both making important

contributions to their beliefs and practices. According to Wang et al. (2008), mentors and

colleagues make important contributions to shaping teacher's beliefs. In several cases

participants' maintained ongoing relationships with these mentors, though only two of

them viewed the training they received as being a significant factor in shaping their

beliefs about play, this could be because only two of the teachers studied received

training on play.

Several teachers reported maintaining ongoing connections to their college

instructors as mentors. Teachers also saw their colleagues, coworkers, and program

directors as important allies, mentors, and/or members of their communities of practice.

There were two common shared experiences that shaped play beliefs. One experience

was the experience of working in the field. Another import experience in teacher's adult

lives connected to play was becoming parents themselves. These important people and experiences contributed to how teachers viewed the role of play in their classrooms and in curriculum.

Role of Play in the Classroom and in Curriculum

An important common element in teachers' approaches to curriculum involved using an emergent curriculum type approach. Teachers described building curriculum around children's interests and providing children with an opportunity to have a voice in curriculum. Teachers discussed using play based experiences as part of this curriculum, yet having a balance between teacher directed and child centered experiences.

Teachers described the use of play as an important part of their teaching practices and an important way to introduce and teach academic concepts and skills. They used terms that indicated play is a central element in their classrooms through phrases like; backbone, driver, and central ingredient. It is interesting to note that the literature shows these are terms teachers historically used to describe the place of play, but are not using now (Bergen, 2009, Neumann, 2009). Perhaps this is connected to the length of experience in teaching the teachers in this study had with all teachers having more than 10 years of experience teaching in the field. Teachers described their role in play as being a guide and facilitator. Teachers also suggested that it is the time children spend in play that reinforces the skills and concepts they are trying to teach. There were also teachers who viewed the time children had for play as important so they could use that time to work with individual children who needed it by removing them from the play.

Teachers were asked about flexibility in their schedules and what classroom activity they would be willing to give up if flexibility was required, two teachers said they would not give up play or play related activities like outside time. The one activity all teachers were not willing to give up was circle/meeting time(s). Six teachers said they would not be flexible with meal or snack times, but these are a necessary part of meeting children's physical needs and do not share as clear a connection to curriculum. In line with what teachers stated, observations in several classrooms indicated opportunities for both play and outside time occurred less than what was reported on classroom schedules. Circle/meeting times lasted longer than reported on classroom schedules.

This discrepancy would seem to indicate that even though teachers state a belief in and value of play that play is viewed as less important than more structured learning opportunities like circle/morning meeting time and more structured lessons. This suggests a weaker link between teachers' stated beliefs and their observed practices in the classroom. There are other aspects of the connection between teachers' beliefs and practices that merit further discussion.

Connections Between Beliefs and Practices

All participants in the study perceived a connection between their beliefs about play and their practices in the classroom. Words like strong, intertwined, and meshed were used to describe this connection. When asked about the mix of teacher-directed and child-centered practices, participants expressed a wide range of responses with the least amount of teacher-directed time being 10% and the highest amount of teacher-directed time being 75%, with an average of 45% of the time being teacher directed. More

structured classrooms offer less opportunity for uninterrupted time and the opportunity for children to deeply immerse themselves in play (Howard, 2010; Milteer & Ginsburg, 2012; Sandberg & Samuelsson, 2003). Further analysis offered another dimension to teachers' practices.

Two types of play in early childhood classrooms were analyzed: play and play in connection to learning. It is important to note that no teacher schedules or curriculum plans used the word play. For the first analysis of play activities labeled with words like choice, free choice, open time, open choice, outside time, or large motor time were counted as play. In classroom observations there was significantly less time devoted to outdoor play in four classrooms than what was scheduled. All classrooms made time for play with an average of 3 hours devoted to play in full day classrooms and 45 minutes devoted to play in half-day classrooms.

What is important to note about these blocks of play is that save for the block of outdoor or large motor time, the majority of play is scheduled at the beginning and end of each day or half-day session. This researcher questions the quality of play during these blocks of time. Typically at the beginning and end of the day children enter and leave at various times. Each time a new child enters the play at the beginning of the day or leaves the play at the end of the day is an interruption of that play. The children in the play have to stop and adjust to accommodate the change in players. It is usually not possible during this time for teachers to offer very much support for the children's play because they are typically engaged in conversations with parents or helping children transition. This means that teachers are not able to support the children in developing connections

between play and learning or to support the learning aspects of the play. These factors

have a negative impact on the quality of play during these times.

Play being used as a teaching practice or play to support learning was also

analyzed. Teacher schedules, curriculum plans, and classroom observations showed that

teachers offered an average of 25 to 30 minutes a day for activities using play as a

teaching practice to support learning. It is important to note that no teacher schedules or

curriculum plans used either the word play or the words play as learning. These activities

were described using the terminology "learning centers, interest areas, bucket time, co-op

time, curriculum time, or center time."

During these play as learning times three of the six teachers in the study were

observed engaging in play by taking a role, offering props, extending a play experience,

talking with children about their play and supporting children in using materials. These

interactions in dramatic play help children develop higher level thinking and self-

regulation (Bodrova & Leong, 2005; Johnson & Ershler, 1981; Vygotsky, 1978). This

has a strong connection to the conceptual framework for this study. In discussion on the

framework for this study Lave (1988) indicated the social engagement of the learners and

the teacher within the learning context are what create the main community of practice of

the classroom.

The evidence gathered in the study showed that teachers were not engaging

children while they were in the context of play as fully as possible. When these

interactions were observed it was most often during either dramatic play or play in the

block area. One teacher in the study was observed supporting children in trying to

engage them in more mature levels of play by helping them understand and maintain their roles in the play. Other teachers were observed supporting children who were playing at less mature levels, but these teachers were not observed scaffolding the play to support children in moving to more mature levels of play. One teacher was directing the play by choosing props for the children and passing them out and one teacher was observed scripting the dramatic play. Another teacher facilitated play by providing props children asked for. During play time two teachers were observed removing children from play to work with them on an individual level. Teachers in the study were missing opportunities to support the connections between the play and the learning that they stated were important.

In addition to taking a role in play teachers also must provide materials and create an environment that invites play (Loughlin & Suina, 1982; Vu et al., 2010). Some curricular staples connected to play in early childhood environments were found to be lacking or limited. It is important to note that dramatic play was only present in two curriculum plans. In two classrooms interest areas for dramatic play did not exist and in the third classroom the dramatic play area was closed off so the children could not access it. Half of the classrooms indicated the inclusion of novel activities or experiences and half of the classrooms observed implemented novel activities. Music beyond singing songs during meeting time was only observed in two classrooms. These activities encourage creative thinking and problem solving. Creative thinking and problem solving are vehicles for the development of higher level thinking (Bergen, 2009; Bodrova & Leong, 2008; Myck-Wayne, 2010).

Teachers indicated that the environment of the classroom could be a barrier to play if space or materials were lacking. With the exception of dramatic play, the environments of the classrooms observed space was ample and well provisioned. The materials available for teachers and children aligned for the most part with the guidelines offered by Loughlin and Suina (1982). In addition to dramatic play centers there were a few key underutilized open-ended experiences. All classrooms had sensory tables only one classroom had an active sensory table. In other classrooms the sensory table was either empty or being used as storage. All classrooms had provisions for art/painting, but only two classrooms had active easels that children could freely access.

In contrast to play the time teachers spent on direct instruction was double the amount of time teachers spent on using play as a teaching practice to support learning. Time spent on direct instruction was determined from teacher schedules, curriculum plans, and classroom observations. It included both structured lessons and large group meetings or circle time and averaged between 45 minutes and 60 minutes. In four classrooms, this time for direct instruction ran between 15 minutes and 30 minutes longer than the time indicated on the schedule. This seems to indicate a lack of connection to teachers' beliefs about play and learning and their actual classroom practices in this area.

In summary, the evidence gathered in this study indicated that even though teachers perceived a strong connection between their beliefs about play and their practices in the classroom there were several areas where beliefs and practices were not connected. Teachers' beliefs and perceptions about play have a great deal of influence on the experiences and learning opportunities offered to children in the classroom (Abu-

Jaber et al., 2010; Borg, 2001; Ready & Wright, 2011). Part of my bias as a researcher

was that I expected to see more play in the classrooms observed. These were high quality

programs with experienced educated teachers and they volunteered to be in a study about

play suggesting a belief in play. The findings from this study indicated the amount of

play occurring in the classrooms observed was much closer to an average of 25%, which

matched the figure in Miller and Almon's (2009) research.

The findings of this study align with the Mc Mullen et al. (2006) study of teacher

beliefs and how those beliefs align with teacher practices. This earlier research on

teacher beliefs related to Developmentally Appropriate Practice indicated teachers had a

more optimistic view of their beliefs being reflected in their practices than what was

actually observed (Mc Mullen et al., 2006). The results of this study are similar. What is

not known is the cause of this discrepancy.

Barriers to Play

In addition to the environment teachers identified several barriers to play. The top

barrier to play was the pressure teachers feel to include more academics and academic

content. This pressure was expressed as a barrier to play by four participants. This

barrier was followed by pressure from parents and administrators to include more

academics and academic content and the need to perform assessments. This aligns with

research indicating parents would like to see a stronger focus on academics in early

childhood education (Howard, 2010; Tobin & Kurban, 2010). The last barrier teachers

mentioned was that they themselves can be a barrier to play. They can get caught up on

managing the classroom and lose the flow of play.

All teachers expressed a wish for a more organized structure for connecting with their colleagues and establishing a more formal and organized community of practice to connect with teach other and to discuss and reflect upon their practices. Teachers saw several positive outcomes that could result from creating more defined communities of practice. Teachers suggested this could be a vehicle for improving program quality and reducing staff turnover. One of the teachers suggested this could be a way to discuss and promote the importance of play and mentor other teachers.

In discussing their views on play teachers indicated their belief that there is not only less opportunity for play in children's lives, but that how children engage in play has changed. Teachers attributed this to children not having the skills for play, not knowing how to play, or having delays that make accessing play difficult. These responses would seem to indicate that these teachers would engage in providing opportunities for play and play based kinds of learning experiences to occur to scaffold children's learning, yet with only 25 to 30 minutes per day devoted to play based learning and an average of 25% of the day devoted to play there does not seem like enough time for this to occur.

Limitations of the Study

This study was conducted in a specific geographic area with a small number of participants. As a result of this narrow demographic and small sample size the participants in the study may be considered a homogenous group. This makes results of the study difficult to generalize. A general limitation of studies of early childhood programs is that there is a lack of standardization of licensing regulations and measures

of quality from state to state. Though purposeful sampling based on program quality and teacher experience addresses some of these limitations.

Implications for Social Change

The audience for this study includes early childhood teachers, administrators of early childhood programs, parents, policy makers, and play researchers. This study adds to the literature and the current understanding of teachers' beliefs and dispositions toward play. The information gained from the study addresses a gap in the literature where teachers' dispositions on play are concerned (Dako-Gyeke, 2010; Tekin & Tekin, 2007) and provides important insights about how teachers' beliefs about play are connected to the decisions teachers make about curriculum and other practices in their classrooms.

In examining the literature, there were very few studies focused on teachers current beliefs about play (Dako-Gyeke, 2011; Fisher et al., 2008; Howard, 2010**;** Leaupepe, 2010; Ranz-Smith, 2007; Tobin & Kurban, 2010). Of these six studies only three focused specifically on teachers in United States. Two of these studies examined teachers' beliefs (Fisher et al., 2008; Ranz-Smith, 2007), but only one study discussed teachers' beliefs about play and using play as a teaching practice (Howard, 2010). The focus of Howard's (2010) study was gauging teachers' confidence and comfort level in using play. These studies all indicated a need for further research.

In future research the literature suggested the use of observations of teachers and children in the classroom as a way to better understand the connection between teachers' beliefs and practices (Abu-Jabar et al., 2010; McMullen et al., 2006; Sheridan, 2007). This study followed those recommendations to the extent of observing teachers. The

need for more information on the amount of training teachers received and how that training influenced their beliefs and practices surfaced in Richards et al., (2010) and Sherwood and Riefel's (2010) studies. Interview questions were designed in this study to capture this information. The methodologies for the studies on teacher beliefs were primarily qualitative which supported the approach of a case study for this study.

The case study approach allowed for the study of multiple cases in multiple settings providing a broad spectrum of participants. A case study supported collecting data from multiple sources through interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Using a case study approach permitted a complete picture to emerge of both teacher beliefs about play and teacher practices in the classroom. This study supports the need for more teacher and parent education regarding supports for play, teacher education on play related topics in the classroom like environments and curriculum, and providing teachers with mentors and a more formal structure for developing communities of practice with their colleagues. These changes could lead to positive social change within the field.

A clearer understanding of the link between teachers' preferences and choices influencing their practices provided by this study could create positive social change as teachers reflect on and make changes to their practices. It may guide program directors, administrators, principals, and school districts in implementing opportunities for teachers to be more reflective about their practices and curriculum. The findings indicated the influence of mentors and colleagues were as influential as training and that teachers expressed a strong willingness to engage in with their colleagues in dialogue about their

practices. This could lead to curriculum changes more inclusive of play and more inclusive of some of the play-based areas of curriculum that were found to be missing in early childhood classrooms and a strengthening of program quality.

The insights gained from this research indicated that there is not as strong a connection between early childhood teachers' beliefs about play and practices in the classroom as teachers perceive there to be. Teachers perceive a higher level of connection and a higher level of play than what was observed. In addition to addressing a gap in the literature regarding a current understanding of teachers' beliefs and dispositions toward play, the information gained from the study also indicates teachers may not be currently making decisions about instructional practices based on their beliefs about how children learn best.

This could have implications for administrators and policy makers in creating and guiding policies and practices for preservice training for teachers as well as establishing long term mentoring or opportunities to engage in conversations with colleagues about teaching practices. These findings also align with the research supporting the use of play based curriculum and play based practices in early childhood classrooms (Fisher et al., 2008). The results of this study may promote more developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood classrooms.

Recommendations for Action

The first recommendation is to disseminate the findings of the study to early childhood teachers. It is important for teachers to understand the trend for a weaker connection between teacher beliefs and practices in the classroom regarding play than

was previously thought to exist. It is important for early childhood educators to understand the potential impact this could have on their practices. The findings of this study indicated that teachers need more support in putting their beliefs into practice. The research indicated that teacher beliefs shape what happens in the classroom (Abu-Jaber et al., 2010). It is recommended that these findings be published in *Young Children*, *Child Care Exchange*, and the *American Journal of Play*. These journals and magazines are widely read by early childhood teachers.

The second recommendation for action is to present the findings from this study at state and national conferences. It is important to get the message to as many early childhood educators as possible in hope that they will in turn create education opportunities for parents, colleagues, and administrators in their programs. If parents and administrators have a clearer understanding about the importance of play based teaching and learning perhaps early childhood educators will feel an ease of pressure to include more academic content using the model of direct instruction. Perhaps parents and administrators will gain a clearer understanding of the importance and relevance of including play in preschool, kindergarten and primary curriculum plans.

The last recommendation is to support early childhood teachers in developing a clearer structure for collaborating with each other and creating a more defined community of practice. The mentoring through this community of practice could help teachers in creating classroom curriculum and experiences that are more aligned with their beliefs about play. An ongoing well defined community of practice could have positive implications in supporting ongoing discussions and discourse related to daily life

and teaching practices in the classroom. In turn this may have a positive impact on the frequency of staff turnover in programs, which could promote an increase in the overall quality of early childhood programs.

Recommendations for Further Study

More research on how early childhood teachers' beliefs connect with their practices in the classroom is needed. A replication of this study could include a different sample of participants and could include teachers with more training on play and play based curriculum. In another study based on this one the demographic could include teachers from a wider geographic area of the United States. A third kind of replication of this study could include teachers from early childhood programs at a variety of levels in their state's QRIS systems or for public school based programs those at a variety of levels in their state or national standings.

Themes surfaced in this study that also warrant closer investigation. Several important open-ended play based activities and experiences found in well purposed early childhood classrooms were missing or limited in the classrooms observed. Dramatic play opportunities were missing or limited in three of the classrooms in the study. The impact this could have on the development of higher level cognitive function including executive function and self-regulation should be examined. Sensory tables were present, but only in use in one of the classrooms observed. The impact this could have on divergent thinking and problem solving skills should be studied further. The use of easels was also lacking, but other methods for creating visual representations of thoughts and ideas, self-

expression, and creativity were available for children, but perhaps this also bears further investigation.

A deeper understanding of the factors causing a weaker connection between early childhood teachers' beliefs and their practices in the classrooms is needed. Perhaps conducting this study using a different methodology could yield more information. A narrative approach to this study collecting, retelling, and interpreting the stories of early childhood teachers, administrators, and parents might offer a clearer understanding of the pressures felt by all parties to include more academic content in early childhood curriculum. A narrative approach could also provide teachers with the needed reflection to discern that there is a lack of alignment between their stated beliefs and observed practices regarding play.

Reflections of the Researcher

During my first classroom observation of a teacher who had shared a strong belief in and value of play during the initial interview, I noted little play was actually occurring in the classroom while I was observing. I realized that I had entered into this study with some beliefs and biases of my own about what I would observe in the classrooms of the early childhood teachers in my study. I made the assumption that early childhood teachers agreeing to participate in a study about play would have a strong belief in and value of play and, in turn, would have classrooms where I would observe lots of play. I also realized if there appeared to be a disconnect between teacher beliefs about play and their practices in the classroom, it could be because their definitions of play differed from my definition of play, and what they described and viewed as play experiences may not

be the same as my descriptions and views of play experiences, but in spite of these differences their beliefs and practices in their classrooms could still be very closely connected to their own definitions of play.

Once I became aware of these assumptions and biases it became clear that these would need to be addressed. I decided to use the follow-up interviews to ask additional questions that would provide me with a clearer picture of participants' definitions of play. And I would use the follow-up interviews to allow participants the opportunity to describe important play experiences. Knowing I would have another vehicle with which to understand participants' definitions and perspectives of play and that these additional questions would provide me with needed and valuable data freed me and allowed me to conduct the classroom observations with a more open mind. This awareness enabled me to address my biases and assumptions in my field notes and while analyzing data and it freed me to set these biases and assumptions aside during the research process.

During the follow-up interviews I found that teachers' definitions of play closely matched the definition of play used for this study. Teachers' descriptions of rich play experiences were clearly connected to their definitions of play. This offered further evidence that teachers' classroom practices were not completely aligned with their beliefs. This finding made the weaker connection between teachers' beliefs about play and their practices in the classroom more evident. My thoughts about teachers' beliefs and practices have changed through doing this research. I see that teachers value and understand the importance of play. I see that teachers feel strongly that their beliefs and practices are connected, but there are some factors that are negatively influencing that

connection. Finally, I see that teachers do not seem to be aware of the lack of alignment between their beliefs and practices regarding play.

Conclusion

Through a case study approach I used multiple cases to explore the connections between early childhood teachers' beliefs about play and their practices in the classroom. Play is being replaced by academics in early childhood classrooms (Fisher et al., 2008). This has the potential to harm children's development and impact their experience when they enter public school (Frost, 2007; Ginsburg, 2007; Heckman, 2011; Patte, 2010; Wood, 2007). It is not clear what early childhood teachers' current beliefs and values about play are and how those beliefs connect to teachers' daily practices in the classroom.

To develop a clearer understanding of teachers' beliefs and dispositions toward play I interviewed experienced, educated early childhood teachers from high quality early childhood programs. I also conducted classroom observations in each teacher's classroom and analyzed curriculum plans and classroom schedules from each classroom. Using the case study approach allowed for the collection of data through multiple sources and offered thick rich descriptions. Through the case study approach I attempted to develop an understanding of the connection between teachers' beliefs about play and their practices in the classroom.

From careful analysis of the data I found that early childhood teachers shared a belief in the positive value of play. I also found that teachers' perceived a strong connection between their beliefs about play and their practices in the classroom. Though teachers believed there to be a strong connection between their beliefs and practices the

evidence showed that this connection was not as strong as teachers perceived. Many factors were identified that may contribute to that disconnect.

Analysis of the data revealed several barriers to implementing play identified by participants. The barrier most commonly identified was the pressure to include more academics in early childhood curriculum. Participants viewed this pressure as stemming from parents and administrators. Further analysis led to the discovery of some key play based and open ended experiences being limited or missing from many of these classrooms. It is not clear whether this lack resulted from the pressure to include more academics or not. More study would be needed to determine this. What is clear is that there is a lack of connection between early childhood teachers' beliefs about play and their practices in the classroom. Research reviewed in Chapter 2 indicating a sharp decline in play led me to speculate whether this suggested a lack of connection between teacher beliefs and practices (Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Sherwood & Reifel, 2010). Evidence gathered in this study did indeed suggest a lack of connection between teacher beliefs and practices in several areas, though teachers do not seem to perceive or be aware of this lack of connection. The lack of self-awareness and understanding about this connection may be a barrier to fully using play as a teaching and learning strategy in the classroom.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions for First Interview of Early Childhood Teachers

1. I would like to hear a little bit about your background. How long have you been teaching? In this field? In this program? With this age group?

2. How would you describe the program you teach in?

3. What training have you had as a teacher? Was theory related to play part of that training? What credential or degree do you hold?

4. What preparation, if any, do you think your credential/degree gave you for your job?

5. If there were other experiences or people that helped prepare you in your work with young children would you share a little bit about them?

6. Please share your beliefs about the teaching and learning of young children.

7. What influences have shaped your beliefs in regard to teaching young children? Are there some influences that have been more powerful, or seemed to carry more weight than others?

8. What do you see as the most important aspects of your role as the teacher in your classroom?

9. Which five aspects, principles, or practices that you would say are the most important in teaching young children? Are these ones you use on a daily basis?

10. How do you think children learn best?

11. How do you approach curriculum? What is the mix of teacher planned and led experiences versus child directed experiences?

12. Please describe what a typical day in your classroom is like. Which experiences are more teacher directed and which experiences are more child-centered or child-directed?

13. When flexibility is required what are the parts of the typical day you are most reluctant to change or let go of?

14. What, if any areas of the day do children have time and space to set their own goals and follow their own agenda?

15. What are your views on play? Has this view changed? If so what influences have shaped the change in your point of view?

16. What role if any does play have in the daily life of your classroom?

17. What role if any does play have in the teaching and learning of young children? If you use play as part of your teaching practices what does that look like?

18. How have your experiences as an early childhood teacher influenced your beliefs about play?

19. What if any is the connection between your beliefs about play and your teaching practices?

20. Are there barriers to putting your beliefs about play into your practice? If so what are they?

Appendix B: Data Sheet for Classroom Observation

Data Sheet for Classroom Observation

Record demographics about the classroom:

Time of observation_____

Ratio of adults to children_____

Group size_____

During the classroom observation look for evidence of the teacher employing, engaging

in, or supporting the learning opportunities and interactions listed below. After each item

code with either: Not observed, Seldom observed, or Observed often. Offer additional

comments in the form of field notes on activities observed and comments on activities

observed other than those listed. These comments should include how play was addressed

or not addressed in each activity observed. Refer to this sheet to develop follow up

questions for the second teacher interview.

1. Hands on learning – teacher offers time for children to play with and manipulate

   materials that help develop an understanding of concepts learned.

2. Cooperative learning – teacher provides children the opportunity to collaborate in

   groups on completing an assigned task.

3. Change of venues – teacher uses different settings both within and outside of the

   classroom to deliver instruction.

4. Teacher directed instruction – whole group experience (like group or circle time)

   or lesson planned and led by the teacher (often focused on a specific learning

   objective involving a skill – e.g. counting, rhyming, reciting the alphabet).

5. Teacher interactions – teacher speaks to children at their own level (uses language familiar to young children, helps describe feelings, makes eye contact, helps to solve problems).

6. Teacher engagement in play – teacher engages children in play by taking a role, offering props, extending play experience, talks with children about their play, engages children in two way conversations about play, supports children in using materials.

7. Dramatic play – teacher creates a space and offers props where children can represent themselves in various roles, often imaginary.

8. Fine motor activities – teacher makes available activities like drawing, painting, writing, and cutting that need a lot of small muscle control and eye hand coordination.

9. Large motor activities – teacher makes available activities like walking, running, and jumping that need large muscle control and balance and coordination.

10. Free Choice – teacher provides time for children to self-select in the instructional environment.

11. Novel activities – teacher plans some novel activities that challenge children to try new experiences.

12. Games – teacher offers activities for fun sometimes used as teaching tools.

13. Music – teacher uses to engage and motivate students in all areas of learning (singing, music for transition, relaxation, to remember information).

14. Materials – teacher provides a variety of open-ended materials for children to self-select from and purposes the classroom with the following materials for use by children. Tools to collect or act on information and include things used for measuring, recording, cutting, and joining. Tools may include clipboards, tape measures, glue, compasses, or digital cameras. Information sources offer data about interests of the child or the curriculum at hand and might include charts, models, reference books, nature specimens, or labels. Containers are used for mixing carrying, or storing work in progress. Containers may include egg cartons, pails, cardboard boxes, and plastic bags. Work spaces are places for children to work and can be individual spaces or group spaces. They can be conventional tables, chairs, and desks or non-conventional floor spaces, mats, cushions, or spaces under tables. Display facilities are used for sharing work and can be empty tables, stands, bulletin board, racks, or window ledges.

15. Environment – teacher provides an environment with a variety of interest areas or centers (blocks, books, sensory, dramatic play, art/painting, writing, manipulatives (table toys), and science).

Appendix C: Matrix

Matrix: Connections between research questions, data collection tools, sources, and datapoints.

Research Questions	Data Collection Tools	Datapoints Yielded	Data Source
How do early childhood teachers' beliefs about and dispositions toward play connect with their practices in the classroom?	The central research question and subquestions will be addressed through interviews, document analysis, and observations of teachers in the classroom.	All interview questions (more detail below), interviews, document analysis, and observations of teachers in the classroom. In addition spontaneous follow-up questions may be asked during the initial interview or during the follow-up interview in order to gain a better understanding of the connection between teachers' beliefs about play and their practices in the classroom.	Six early childhood teachers will provide the data pertaining to their classroom and practices.
(Subquestion 1): What are teachers' current beliefs, perceptions, or dispositions toward play?	This question will be addressed through interviews.	**Interview questions:** Please share your beliefs about the teaching and learning of young children. What are your views on play? Has this view changed? If so	The six early childhood teachers in the study will provide the data.

		what influences have shaped the change in your point of view?	
(Subquestion 2): What influences shaped teachers' beliefs (training, mentor, parents)?	This question will be addressed through interviews.	**Interview questions:** What training have you had as a teacher? What credential or degree do you hold? What preparation, if any, do you think your credential/degree gave you for your job? If there were other experiences or people that helped prepare you in your work with young children would you share a little bit about them? What influences have shaped your beliefs in regard to teaching young children? Are there some influences that have been more powerful, or seemed to carry more weight than others?	The six early childhood teachers in the study will provide the data.
(Subquestion 3): How do teachers perceive the role of play in early childhood classrooms?	This question will be addressed through interviews, document analysis, and observations of teachers in the classroom.	**Interview questions:** When flexibility is required what are the parts of the typical day you are most reluctant to change or let go of? What, if any areas of the day do children	The six early childhood teachers in the study will provide the data.

		have time and space to set their own goals and follow their own agenda? What role if any does play have in the daily life of your classroom? What role if any does play have in the teaching and learning of young children? If you use play as part of your teaching practices what does that look like? Environment – teacher provides an environment with a variety of interest areas or centers (blocks, books, sensory, dramatic play, art/painting, writing, manipulatives (table toys), and science). **Document Analysis** **Classroom** **Observation**	
(Subquestion 4): How are teachers' beliefs regarding play and teaching practices, instructional models, and curriculum choices used in the	This question will be addressed through interviews, document analysis, and observations of teachers in the classroom.	**Interview questions:** Which five aspects, principles, or practices that you would say are the most important in teaching young children? Are these	The six early childhood teachers in the study will provide the data.

| classroom related? | | ones you use on a daily basis? How do you think children learn best? How do you approach curriculum? What is the mix of teacher planned and led experiences versus child directed experiences? Please describe what a typical day in your classroom is like. Which experiences are more teacher directed and which experiences are more child-centered or child-directed? What if any is the connection between your beliefs about play and your teaching practices? **Document Analysis Classroom Observation** | |

Appendix D: Data Sheet for Evaluating Classroom Schedules and Curriculum

Plans

Data Sheet for Evaluating Classroom Schedules and Curriculum Plans

Analyze the Classroom Schedules and Curriculum Plans and look for evidence of the teacher supporting the following learning opportunities. After each item (unless otherwise instructed) categorize with either: Classroom Schedule or Curriculum Plans for evidence of the item appearing on those documents. If no evidence appears on either document categorize with Not Noted. For each item observed indicate an approximate amount of time devoted to each activity. Offer additional comments on activities indicated other than the ones listed. This will capture activities not observed as part of the classroom observation. Refer to this sheet and any other materials teachers have offered to develop follow up questions for the second teacher interview.

1. Hands on learning – offering time for children to play with and manipulate
   materials that help develop an understanding of concepts learned.

2. Cooperative learning – students collaborate in groups on completing an assigned
   task.

3. Change of venues – teacher uses different settings both within and outside of the
   classroom to deliver instruction.

4. Teacher directed instruction – whole group experience (like group or circle time)
   or lesson planned and led by the teacher (often focused on a specific learning
   objective involving a skill – e.g. counting, rhyming, reciting the alphabet).

5. Dramatic play – children can represent themselves in various roles, often imaginary.

6. Fine motor activities – activities like drawing, painting, writing, and cutting that need a lot of small muscle control and eye hand coordination.

7. Large motor activities – activities like walking, running, and jumping that need large muscle control and balance and coordination.

8. Free Choice – providing time for children to self-select in the instructional environment.

9. Novel activities – teacher plans some novel activities that challenge children to try new experiences.

10. Games – activities for fun sometimes used as teaching tools.

11. Music – can be used to engage and motivate students in all areas of learning (singing, music for transition, relaxation, to remember information).

12. Play – time is scheduled for play. How much for free choice? How much for outside? How much or how is play as a learning opportunity scheduled?

Curriculum Vitae

Robin L. Ploof MEd

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EDUCATION

2008- Present   Completing Doctoral degree at Walden University, with a specialization in
Early Childhood; ABD

1995   M.Ed., Saint Michael's College, Colchester VT, Elementary Education

1981   B.A., University of New Haven, New Haven CT, Major Fine Arts, Minor in
Theater

1995-Present   Vermont Certification in Elementary Education

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE AND SERVICE AT CHAMPLAIN COLLEGE

July 2013 – Present   **Champlain College, Program Director for M.Ed. in Early
Childhood,** Burlington VT. Taught courses in the graduate program and
advised students. Hired and mentored new adjunct faculty members.
Assisted students and faculty with the transition of the program to a new
online Learning Management System. Planned an academic residency in
conjunction with the NAEYC Annual Conference in Washington, DC
will implement the residency and present at the conference in mid-
November. Assisted Graduate Admissions with recruitment at two
AEYC conferences. Worked with Marketing to promote the program.

Fall 2010-July 2013   **Champlain College, Adjunct Faculty,** Burlington VT. Taught early
childhood education courses in both the undergraduate and graduate
programs. Involved in development of Champlain's M.Ed. program.
Taught courses in program continuously since its inception in 2011.
Designed and wrote *GEE-504-81 Supporting Children and Families* and
*GEE-506-81 Observation, Description, and Documentation of the Young
Child.* Participated in advising sessions for students in the M.Ed.
program. Mentored three new adjuncts in the M.Ed. program prior to and
throughout teaching their first courses.

Fall 1996 - 2003   **Champlain College, Adjunct Faculty,** Burlington VT. Taught courses
related to early childhood education to non-traditional students. Provided
tours of the Champlain College campus and supported students through
their first experience of taking a college course. Designed and wrote the

Leadership and Mentoring course for the Vermont Apprenticeship Program.

TEACHING AT CHAMPLAIN COLLEGE

GRADUATE COURSES 2011-PRESENT

GEE-501-81 Early Childhood & Play: From Theory to Practice
GEE-504-81 Supporting Children and Families
GEE-506-81 Observation, Description, and Documentation of the Young Child
GEE-532-81 Math and Science for Young Children
GEE-522-81 Teaching K through Grade 3rd and Practicum
GEE-524-81 Infant and Toddler Curriculum and Development
GEE-540-81 Curriculum for Administrators
GEE-600-81 Action Research Project I
GEE-610-81 Action Research Project II

M.Ed. COURSE DEVELOPMENT

GEE-504-81 Supporting Children and Families
GEE-506-81 Observation, Description, and Documentation of the Young Child

UNDERGRADUATE COURSES FOR THE VERMONT APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAM THROUGH THE VERMONT CHILD CARE INDUSTRY AND CAREERS COUNCIL 2001-2003

Child Development
Foundations of Learning
Integrated Preschool Curriculum
Art and Music
Program Management
Mentoring and Leadership

UNDERGRADUATE COURSES FOR CHILD CARE RESOURCE AND REFERRAL THROUGH THE COMMUNITY SERVICES DIVISION EACH TAUGHT TWO TO THREE TIMES 1998-2000

Child Development
Foundations of Learning
Integrated Preschool Curriculum
Program Management
Apprenticeship Course on Mentoring

UNDERGRADUATE COURSES

Children's Literature and the Expressive Arts (two sections Fall 2010, two sections Fall 2011 taught during full time faculty sabbatical)

UNDERGRADUATE COURSE DEVELOPMENT

Mentoring and Leadership
Program Management (helped develop this course)

SERVICE TO CHAMPLAIN COLLEGE

- Assisted Graduate Admissions with recruitment at an AEYC conference (2013)
- Graduate Studies Summit (2012) Presented a workshop on surviving graduate school to prospective and current students
- Statewide Summit for Early Childhood Education (2012) Represented Champlain College at the Manchester VT event staffed a table and spoke as part of a panel
- Attended all Residencies for M.Ed. Program (Orlando 2011, Indianapolis 2012, Atlanta 2012, San Francisco, 2013)
  Met students in the graduate program and met with prospective students, supported their learning as they navigated the residency
- Supported in planning residencies. Assisted with selection of text for discussion, sessions for students to attend, and choosing speaker for student event
- Children's Fun Fair Facilitator (2010, 2011) Supported education students in organizing, setting up, and running the Children's Fun Fair
- Advisory committee for Early Childhood and Elementary Education (2007, 2008) Committee member

MENTORING CHAMPLAIN COLLEGE STUDENTS AND STAFF

2011-2012   Participated in advising sessions for students in the M.Ed. program
2012   Mentored three new adjuncts in the M.Ed. program prior to and throughout teaching their first courses
2010-2011   Set up and supervised America Reads placements and Book Buddies placements for education students
2003-2010   Mentored education students during their placements in my early childhood program

OTHER PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Spring 1996-Present   **Literacy Trainer, Vermont Humanities Council,** Montpelier VT.
Implemented *Never Too Early*, *Early Birds and Bookworms, Ready to Learn*, and *Advanced Literacy* programs for child care providers in Chittenden, Franklin, and Grand Isle Counties. Set up and facilitated dozens of trainings. Designed training program and served as mentor for three Ameri-Corps Volunteers for 1998-2000 and 2001-2002, enabling them to provide one-on-one literacy training to in-home child care providers.

Spring 1996-Present   **Private Consultant.** Worked with area agencies, early childhood programs and individuals to assess needs and improve the quality of services provided for young children. Served as a consultant to two centers for a year on the Quality Consultation Project through Child Care Resource and IBM Work Family Directions. Served as a consultant through the Accreditation Project sponsored by Child Care Resource. Served as consultant, trainer, and instructor through the Olive Branch Consulting Group. Have also worked with early childhood programs in planning and designing space, curriculum, and administrative organization.

Fall 1995-Spring 2013   **Instructor, Child Care Resource and Referral,** Williston VT. Designed and taught four college level courses in early childhood education on a two courses per semester rotation. *Child Growth and Development, Creating a Learning Environment, Essential Elements of Curriculum, and Program Planning for the Early Childhood Professional* were designed to cover all of the major goal areas and competencies for the CDA credential. Worked with non-traditional students of various skill levels and abilities.

Summer 1988-May 2013   **Owner/Director/Teacher, Stepping Stones Children's Center,** Burlington VT. Developed and founded a program to provide early care and education in a multi-age setting for families with young children. Managed the day to day and year to year operations of a NAEYC accredited early childhood program including; hiring, training, and supervision of staff, and student teachers, grant, budget writing, accounting and bookkeeping services. Organized center wide activities involving staff, children, and families. Taught group of young children aged ten months to six years. Developed and implemented emergent curriculum in the model of Reggio Emilia. Observed and assessed children's development. Facilitated communication with families through newsletters, daily chats, parent-teacher conferences, and community meetings.

Winter 2011-2012   **Early Learning Mentor Coach, Head Start,** Burlington VT. Served as a mentor coach for a first year preschool teacher in a Head Start preschool classroom. Provided a year of weekly side by side coaching and mentoring for a first year teacher in a Head Start classroom. Offered curriculum support and team building experiences for the entire teaching staff in the classroom. Provided workshop trainings for Head Start staff, staff at the child care center housing the Head Start classroom, and other mentees.

Spring 2002   **Adjunct Faculty, Saint Michael's College,** Colchester VT. Taught *Child Development* at the undergraduate level.

Fall 1998 – 2000   **Facilitator, Mentor, Advisor, CDA Support Group**, Burlington VT. Created a support network for candidates working toward their CDA credential. Facilitated monthly group meetings. Individual support also given to those who needed it at other times during the month. Conducted site visits and observations

as a mentor. Served as an advisor when candidate no longer needed the support of a mentor.

Fall 1991-Winter 1995   **Facilitator, Curriculum Consultant, Vermont State Employee's Association,** Burlington VT. Facilitated monthly meetings and provided curriculum support for local family home child care providers to improve quality and support those providers in achieving their Child Development Credential.

Spring 1988   **Substitute Teacher First Grade, Essex Town Elementary School,** Chittenden Central Supervisory Union. Taught in self-contained first grade classroom while regular teacher was on medical leave.

1985-Spring 1988   **Primary Care Giver, Family Resource Center,** Burlington VT. Provided services to clients in a day treatment program for dysfunctional families. Taught a classroom of toddlers. Developed and implemented curriculum including organization of field trips. Observed and assessed children's development. Attended basic staffing meetings for children with special needs, and implemented their I.E.P. goals in my classroom. Supervised and trained student teachers and interns. Developed and implemented home visiting program for in-home parent training involving child management skills and child development.

Fall 1984   **Para educator, Shelburne Middle School,** Chittenden South Supervisory Union, Shelburne, VT. Worked one-on-one inside and outside the classroom with seventh grade student to implement I.E.P. goals in math, reading, speech, and developing independent living skills.

1983-Fall 1984   **Program Director, Child Care Provider, Rainbow Day Care,** Rutland VT. Designed and implemented curriculum for fifteen preschool aged children. Taught as part of a two person team. Held parent/teacher conferences. Also responsible for keeping track of and budgeting for supplies.

1982-1983   **U.Y.A. Intern, Family Resource Center,** Burlington VT. Worked with preschool aged children and their families. Provided respite child care. Planned and implemented curriculum. Co-leader of therapeutic recreation group for parents.

1981-1982   **Program Coordinator, H.O. Wheeler School,** Burlington School District, Burlington VT. Developed an art program and provided art instruction for kindergarten and first grade classrooms.

MEMBERSHIP IN PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Vermont Association for the Education of Young Children, 1987-present
- **Board Past-President,** Fall 2013-present
- **Board President**, Fall 2010-Fall 2013
- **Board Secretary,** Fall 2008- Fall 2010
- **Board Member**, Fall 2001- Fall 2008
- **Conference Coordinator and Board member,** 1997-2002

National Association for the Education of Young Children, Lifetime member
National Association for the Education of Young Children
- **Affiliate Council** member 2010-present
- **Executive Affiliate Council** member 2013-present

Play Policy and Practice Interest Forum, 2009-present

HONORS AND AWARDS

- **Early Childhood Professional of the Year,** 2007, Early Childhood Connections, Burlington VT.   (all encompassing)
- **It Takes A Village Award,** 2006, Lund Family Center, Burlington VT. (center directorship and work with families)
- **Advocate of the Year,** 2001, Child Care Resource and Referral, Williston VT. (public policy)
- **Making A Difference Award,** 1999, Child Care Resource and Referral, Williston VT. (teaching adults)
- **Quality Improvement,** 1997, Child Care Resource and Referral, Williston VT. (mentoring adult students)
- **Distinguished Service Award,** 1996, Vermont Association for the Education of Young Children, Waterbury VT (lifetime achievement award)
- **Nurturing the Whole Family – Quality in Working with Families,** 1991, Child Care Resource and Referral, Williston VT. (center directorship)
- **Finalist, Top Ten Preschool Teachers of the Year,** 1995, Child Magazine, Des Moines IA. (teaching at the preschool level)

ADDITIONAL TEACHING EXPERIENCE

UNDERGRADUATE COURSES TAUGHT THROUGH UNION INSTITUTE 2003-2013

Fundamentals
Child Development
Creating a Learning Environment
Curriculum Essentials
Program Planning for the Early Childhood Professional

UNDERGRADUATE COURSE TAUGHT AT SAINT MICHAEL'S COLLEGE

Child Development

MENTORING STUDENTS

1985-1988	Mentored students from the University of Vermont and Trinity College during their placements in my early childhood classroom.

MENTORING OTHER PROFESSIONALS

1998-2002	Mentored Ameri-Corps/VISTA Volunteers to provide one-on-one literacy training to in-home child care providers as part of the Vermont Humanities Council.
2011-2012	Mentored a first year preschool teacher in a Head Start Program.

SUPERVISION

2001-2003	Supervised an apprentice early childhood teacher as part of the Vermont Apprenticeship Program.

SCHOLARSHIP OF TEACHING, PROFESSIONAL SERVICE, AND LEADERSHIP

PUBLICATIONS

Journal Article:
Ploof, R. (2012). Team VAEYC energizes and strengthens affiliate volunteerism. *Young*

   Children, 67(1), 60-61.

National Newsletter Articles:
Ploof, R. (2008). Creating community. *Concerned Educators for a Safe Environment (CEASE),*

   29(1)

Ploof, R. (2007). Super happy super hero. *Concerned Educators for a Safe Environment*

   (CEASE), 28(1)

Statewide Newsletter Articles:
Vermont Association for the Education of Young Children (VAEYC) eConnections
- *Five great reasons to belong.* June, 2011.
- *At the heart of Reggio Emilia*. June. 2009.
- *Reflecting on play and learning*. July, 2008.
Vermont Humanities Council (1997)

- Series of six articles on literacy and reading aloud with young children published state wide through individual newsletters of the twelve Vermont Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies.

PRESENTATIONS WORKSHOPS AND TRAININGS
NATIONAL CONFERENCES

National Association for the Education of Young Children Annual Conference
- Exploring the Connections Between Early Childhood Teachers Beliefs about Play in Regard to their Practices (2013)
- Affiliate Initiatives and Successes (2012)

REGIONAL CONFERENCES

New England Association for the Education of Young Children Annual Conference:
- Meeting Management (2003)
- Fostering the Development of Emergent Literacy (1998)

Vermont and New Hampshire Administrators Annual Conference:
- Clear Constructive Feedback (2006)
- A Systems Approach to Hiring, Evaluation, and Professional Development (2007, 2008)

STATEWIDE CONFERENCES AND TRAININGS

Vermont Association for the Education of Young Children Annual Conference and Spring Speaker Events:
- A Child's Work: The Importance of Play (2013)
- Math and Literacy Hand in Hand Partners in Learning (2012)
- Children and Violent Play (2010)
- Learning Living and Loving with Infants and Toddlers (2010)
- Essentials of Emergent Curriculum (2009)
- Playing with Assessment (2008)
- Effective and Responsive Communication with Children (2007)
- Clear Constructive Feedback (2006)
- A Systems Approach to Hiring, Evaluation, and Professional Development (2005)
- Fostering the Development of Emergent Literacy (2004)
- Clear Constructive Feedback (2003)
- Fostering the Development of Emergent Literacy (1999)
- Trash to Treasure Creating with Recyclables (1997)
- Multi-Age Curriculum (1995)
- Process Art and the Creative Child (1990)

Turtle Island Children's Center
- Making Learning Visible: Observation, Documentation, and Curriculum (2014)
- Exploring Connections Between Teacher Beliefs and Practices about Play (2014)

Champlain Valley Head Start:
- Color Your World (2012)
- Children and Violent Play (2012)
- Color Your World (2011)
- Math and Literacy Hand in Hand Partners in Learning (2011)
- Color Your World (2010)
- Creative Arts Playshop (2008)

Vermont Council on the Humanities:
- Never Too Early (four to six sessions per year 1996-present)
- Early Birds and Bookworms (four to six sessions per year 1996-present)
- Teaching the Earliest Teachers (2003)
- Ready to Learn (1998)

Aspirations Child Care Center:
- Fostering the Development of Emergent Literacy (2013)

Greater Burlington Y.M.C.A.
- Math and Literacy Hand in Hand Partners in Learning (2012)

Vermont Achievement Center:
- Living and Loving with Infants and Toddlers (2012)
- Color Your World (2012)
- Children and Violent Play (2012)

Retired Senior Volunteer Program:
- Fostering the Development of Emergent Literacy (2012)

Robin's Nest Children's Center:
- Effective and Responsive Communication with Children (2011)

South Burlington Rotary Club:
- Fostering the Development of Emergent Literacy (2011)

Acorn Child Care:
- Observation and Assessment (2010)
- Emergent Curriculum (2010)
- Building on Learning through Block Play (2010)

Waterbury Children's Center:
- Building on Learning through Block Play (2009)

Ascension Child Care Center:
- Playful Learning (2008)
- Emergent Curriculum (2006)

Rainbow Child Care Center (2002)
- Emergent Curriculum

College Street Child Care:
- Emergent Curriculum (2001)

Children's Television Workshop in conjunction with Vermont Public Television:
- Ready to Learn (Preschool Early Education Project) (2001)

Newport Providers Association:
- Trash to Treasure Creating with Recyclables (2000)
- Playshop (1999)

Stern Center:
- Mentor Training (1997)

Addison County Parent Child Center:
- Learning Through Play (1995)
- Kitchen Science (1995)

Child Protection Network:
- Building Self-Esteem in Young Children (1987)

GRANTS WRITTEN AND ADMINISTERED

- Child Development Block Grant, Vermont Department of Children and Families, 1995
- Child Development Block Grant, Vermont Department of Children and Families, 1999
- CDA Facilitation Project, Vermont Department of Children and Families, 1998-2000

PROFESSIONAL CONSULTING

- Williston Child Care Center, Williston, VT. Consultant, 2012
- Turtle Island, Montpelier, VT. Curriculum Consultant and Mentor, 2012-2013
- Creative Minds, Newport, VT. Curriculum Consultant and Trainer, 2007
- Turtle Island, Montpelier, VT. Offered long term training for quality improvement and curriculum, 2005-2006
- Frog and Toad, Colchester, VT. Consultant for Quality Improvement 2004-2005
- Turtle Island, Curriculum Consultant 2003
- Quality Consultation Project through Child Care Resource and IBM Work Family Directions Accreditation Project. Supported programs working toward NAEYC Accreditation 2000-2002

LEADERSHIP AND COMMITTEE WORK

- Chittenden County Early Learning Partnership 2001-20012
- National Association for the Education of Young Children, Affiliate Council member 2010-present
- Director's Credential Design Committee (2001-2003)
- Kid Safe Network, advisory board 2000
- Training Advisory Committee for Child Care Resource 1998-2000
- Invitation To Communities Initiative 1998
- Conference Coordinator for New England AEYC Conference 1998

- Advisory Committee for Trinity College for Inclusive Early Childhood Education 1997
- Vermont AEYC Conference Committee 1995-1997 (Workshop Coordinator 1996-1997)