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# The Lived Play Experiences of Kindergarten Teachers: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Robin Terrell Holman

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Walden University  
2016

Abstract

The Lived Play Experiences of Kindergarten Teachers:

An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

By

Robin Terrell Holman

MA, University of Maine, 2003

BS, University of Southern Maine, 1991

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

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October 2016

## Abstract

Following implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act and Common Core Standards, play experience opportunities by kindergarten students have been compromised. Prior research indicates that how teachers make sense of play is most likely reflected in educational practice. The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis was to gather the lived experiences of 5 kindergarten teachers from northern New England on the nature of play through pre-reflective description and reflective interpretation. Guided by Vygotsky's social constructivist theory as the conceptual framework, the goal of this study was to describe lived play experiences of kindergarten teachers. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were used to answer the main research question about the essence of play as expressed by teachers. Interviews were transcribed, reduced, coded, and analyzed for common thematic elements and essences regarding the impact of how play manifests in curriculum planning and classroom arrangement. Three themes emerged: community building, creative learning, and engaged excitement. The findings revealed that although kindergarten teachers experienced the nature of play differently, play naturally and unequivocally seemed to promote social skills and cooperation, language and concept development, and motivated and self-directed learners. Additional findings showed an incompatibility between the lived world interpretations of kindergarten teachers and the district curriculum expectations. This study influences positive social change by opening educational discussions about kindergarten pedagogy, leading to improved classroom practice.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this paper to the hundreds of young children who have taught me the value of play.

## Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I want to thank the hundreds of young children that have become my greatest teachers. I offer deep gratitude to my husband Brian who diligently supported the highs and lows of this process. Thank you for being my hero! Many thanks to my parents William and Catherine who have always given me the space to pursue my passions and interests.

The words of wisdom and encouragement from Beth, Gina, Karen, Claudette, Mary, Debbie, Pat, Laura, Lynda, and Carol have kept me afloat when the process felt challenging. I express gratitude to Nancy who allowed space for kindergarten teachers to explore the educational potential of children's play. Lastly, Namaste to my committee chairs Dr. Darragh Callahan and Dr. Maryanne Longo. My journey was paved with your understanding, knowledge, patience, and passion for play in early childhood classrooms. I feel honored to have worked under your guidance. I am blessed to have supportive and compassionate people in my life.

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## Section 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

Free play experiences have been replaced with more academic tasks in kindergarten classrooms across the nation. Experts and researchers in early childhood education have articulated the importance and benefits of play-based pedagogy in early childhood environments such as kindergarten for decades (Brown, 2009; Copple & Bredekamp, 2012; Fler, 2010; LaRue & Kelly, 2015; Leong & Bodrova, 2012; Miller & Almon, 2009; Woolf, 2013). Playful learning is more effective than direct instruction because play infiltrates most domains of development and early learning (Bonawitz et al., 2010). Yet, due to the perceived demands of the Common Core Standards, the No Child Left Behind Act, 2001, 2002, and teacher accountability initiatives, kindergarten teachers report less play than ever takes place in school (Bassok & Rorem, 2014; Bowdon, 2015; Fler, 2009; Miller & Almon, 2009; Russell, 2011; Waltson, 2013).

Because of federal and local expectations and accountability measures, teachers in a northern New England rural school district have replaced play experiences such as dramatic play, blocks, or sand and water with 60-90 minutes of teacher directed math and literacy instruction. These teachers experienced an increase in academic rigor and a decrease in free play opportunities (C. O., personal communication, April, 2015). For instance, a veteran teacher of 15 years removed a water table from her kindergarten classroom because there was not enough time to play during the kindergarten day due to an increase in academic demands (P.M., personal communication, April, 2015). This phenomenological study described and interpreted the essence of kindergarten teachers'

lived experiences of the nature of play in terms of curriculum planning and classroom arrangement. Knowledge of kindergarten teachers lived play experiences have potential to define and secure more appropriate play in the classroom. The following sections offer background information, problem statement, purpose of the study, research questions, nature of the study, definitions, significance of the study, and summary.

### **Background**

From a historical perspective, the gradual shift in kindergarten pedagogy had been on a steady incline for over the past five decades. The adoption of No Child Left Behind Act, 2001, 2002 and Common Core Standards have activated the rate of rapid decline in play experiences in kindergarten because of the increase in academic expectations and test preparation (Gray 2013; Miller & Almon, 2009; Russell, 2011; Walston, 2013). Russell (2011) revealed that a cultural shift in kindergarten pedagogy has pressured teachers to move away from developmentally appropriate practices such as play even though early childhood experts and scholars have argued how developmental education builds upon the intrinsic motivation and interests of children and play has a positive influence on child development and early learning (Copple & Bredekamp, 2012; Jones & Reynolds, 2011). The apparent shift in pedagogy may contribute to a misalignment in practice and beliefs because the use of play-based venues such as sand and water exploration, building blocks, and dramatic play that were once considered daily components in most kindergarten environments has decreased greatly and has been replaced with a more didactic approach to instruction (Abry, Latham, Bassok &

LoCasale-Crouch, 2015; Gray, 2013; Miller & Almon, 2009; Moon & Reifel, 2008; Russell, 2011; Sherwood & Reifel, 2010; Waltson, 2013).

An academic approach to instruction in early childhood appears to have contributed to disparity among kindergarten teachers because an academic-only approach to early childhood education disconnects teachers from the whole child and is out of context with how young children naturally construct knowledge and meaning (Carlsson-Paige, McLaughlin & Almon, 2015; Miller & Almon, 2009; Russell, 2011). Children are most often successful and develop lifetime skills when embraced by educational communities that understand the “improvisational potential of play” and the complexity of human growth and development, (Brown, 2009, p.18; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Hyson, 2008; Mraz, Porcelli, & Tyler, 2016). Sherwood and Reifel (2010) argued that there is a significant difference between how early childhood teachers perceive and implement play in the classroom. Likewise, Sherwood and Moon (2008) found that teachers’ pre-established understandings of play tend to impact pedagogy. The differences found in perceptions and actual implementation were attributed to personal beliefs, prior experiences and training, educational demands, and school system policy (Sherwood & Reifel, 2011).

This qualitative phenomenological study gathered a deeper insight into the essence of kindergarten teachers’ lived or life-world play experiences. The findings from this study have the potential to serve as an impetus for the reexamination or reemphasis of play as an essential element in early kindergarten pedagogy.

### **Problem Statement**

There appears to be an unbalanced shift in early childhood education in terms of developmentally appropriate pedagogy. The problem with this shift in pedagogy is there appears to be a lack of understanding of teachers' lived experiences of the nature of play (Fleer, 2011; LaRue & Kelly, 2015; Miller & Almon, 2009; Ranz-Smith, 2012; Russell, 2011; Sherwood & Reifel, 2010; Snow, 2012; Woolf, 2008). Due to an increased emphasis on teacher-directed instruction and academic preparedness, there seems to be a growing gap between the science of child development and early learning and teacher's beliefs and instructional practices (Fleer, 2011; LaRue & Kelly, 2015; Miller & Almon 2009; Moon & Reifel, 2008; Russell, 2011; Sherwood & Reifel, 2010). The apparent shift in early childhood pedagogy has evoked this investigation of how teachers experience play in the kindergarten environment.

### **Purpose of the Study**

An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is designed to capture the essence of an experience through the lens of those living it. The purpose of this study was to gather the lived experiences of the nature of play by five kindergarten teachers from northern New England through prereflective descriptions and reflective interpretations in terms of how the experience of play manifests in curriculum planning and classroom arrangement. For the purpose of this study, the phenomenon called *play* was defined as an active, hands-on, engaging, and personal present-moment experience (Brown, 2009; Frost, Wortham, & Reifel, 2012; Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978).

## **Research Questions**

The examination of teachers' lived play experiences was worthwhile because how teachers make sense of play is most likely reflected in educational practice. Not only does the phenomenon of play seem to single-handedly present educational challenges, but also the understanding of teacher lived experiences seems to encompass its own set of intricacies (Frost, Wortham, & Reifel, 2012). In order to better understand how teachers make sense of the play experience, a qualitative IPA was employed. The overarching research question and two subquestions were:

RQ: What are the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers regarding the nature of play?

SQ1. How do the lived play experiences of kindergarten teachers manifest in curriculum planning?

SQ2. How do the lived play experiences of kindergarten teachers manifest in classroom arrangement?

## **Nature of the Study**

The overall purpose of this study was to gather the lived experiences the nature of by play by five kindergarten teachers in northern New England. In order to answer the overarching question—What are the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers regarding the nature of play?—an IPA was conducted. Phenomenology is a philosophical movement founded by Edmund Husserl and is used in research to gain a deeper understanding of the essence of a life-world or lived experience (van Manen, 2014). Through a phenomenological procedure of lived experience descriptions (LEDs) and



semistructured interviews, the central phenomenon called *play* was investigated in order to describe and interpret the essence of kindergarten teachers lived play experiences.

The purpose of a phenomenological approach is to capture the essence of an experience through the lens of those living it (Bogan & Bilken, 2007; Creswell, 2012; van Manen, 2014). Phenomenological research attempts to describe meaning of an experience prereflectively rather than through forming generalizations. Furthermore, phenomenological research offers insight into why people do what they do through the study of the life-world (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; van Manen, 2014). For this research to be a transferable and credible resource in early childhood, I needed to develop a level of trustworthiness with the participants. One point of consideration for the participants in this research was that all beliefs and experiences are valid in terms of understanding play irrespective of early childhood philosophy, school policy, or life stressors. Further, in order to allow the experiences of the participants to be heard, my biases and experiences as a veteran kindergarten teacher who values play were placed on the perimeter of this study. The descriptive expression and interpretation of kindergarten teachers' experiences have the potential to create social change for young children because teachers are unequivocally involved in the growth and development of a society.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The central phenomenon of play is best understood within the context of social and cultural experiences (Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978). Social constructivism is a knowledge-oriented approach to understanding how social interactions influence the construction of knowledge because the experience of human interactions is one place

where deeper meaning and understanding is formed (Smith et al., 2009; Woodhead, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978). In addition, social and cultural interactions are often embedded in lived experiences, and it is the interactions that support a deeper understanding or insight of the phenomenon being studied (Piaget, 1962; Rogoff, 2003; Smith et al., 2009; Vygotsky, 1978).

The sociocultural perspective of Vygotsky served as a framework for the study because social influences are most often juxtaposed within play experiences. The framework allowed for gathering the descriptive lived play experiences of kindergarten teachers through reflection in terms of how the meaning behind life experiences were constructed and manifested within the context of the kindergarten classroom (Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978).

### **Operational Definitions**

*Didactic instruction:* A teacher driven task (Watson & Wildy, 2014).

*Free play:* Children's self-initiation of play without teacher direction (Ranz-Smith, 2012).

*Guided, participatory, dialectical, educational assistant, observer, stage manager, scribe, mediator, and coplayer:* Terms that refer to the teacher's role in a play experience (Fleer, 2011; Hedges & Cullen, 2011; Wohlwend, 2011).

*Lived-experience description (LED):* A formal writing protocol used to gather phenomenological data (Vagle, 2014)

*Pedagogy*: A set of techniques and strategies that enable learning to take place and provide opportunities for the construction of knowledge, skills, or attitudes (Watson & Wildy, 2014).

*Play*: An active, hands-on, engaging, and personal present-moment experience (Brown; 2009; Frost et al., 2012).

*Play-based and child-centered learning*: When children are coconstructors of learning who make choices in their learning (Watson & Wildy, 2014).

*Whole child*: An approach to learning that includes all domains of learning, such as social, emotional, physical, and cognitive (Frost et al., 2012; Copple & Bredekamp 2012).

### **Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

#### **Assumptions**

An assumption of this study was that the participants were honest in their responses to the interview and their written LED. I also assumed that the participants developed a level of trust with me in terms of responses to each research inquiry. Further, I assumed that the participants valued play to some degree as a form of pedagogy in the kindergarten setting.

#### **Limitations**

The limitations to this study included time and resources available to collect the information. Another limitation was that the participants were all kindergarten teachers in a public school setting within in a similar geographical region. Further limitations included potential researcher bias, the number of participants, and the sampling method.

To gain a deeper understanding of a lived experience, it was necessary to limit the number of participants in the IPA because the main goal was quality over quantity. Given the intricacies of most lived experiences, a smaller population was necessary in order to gain a deep understanding of the meaning behind a shared phenomenon.

### **Delimitations**

There are two delimitations in this study. The first was that the five participants are kindergarten teachers. Another delimitation was that each participant had a year or more of teaching experience in the kindergarten environment. Semistructured audio recorded interviews, handwritten notes, and participant's written LEDs, were used to gather, describe, and interpret data.

### **Significance of Study**

This research was significant because it addressed the lived play experiences of professionals who interact directly with kindergarten children on a daily basis. The experiences of those who engage directly with children will have the power to either contribute to the enhancement of or to the decline in play-based pedagogy in kindergarten (Jones & Reynolds, 2011). Further, it is through the description of lived play experiences of kindergarten teachers that play could be better understood or investigated throughout all domains of development and early learning. Lastly, to interpret teachers' descriptive lived experiences of play, it was necessary to understand the essence of the experience.

The central phenomenon called *play* was researched to gather individual and collective data from five kindergarten teachers through the phenomenological approach of LEDs and semistructured interviews. This study may serve as a catalyst for social

change because the lived experiences of teachers will add to the limited research available regarding how teachers experience play. Further, the more opportunities that teachers have to recall and describe the lived play experience, the better the chances are of creating empowered professional learning communities that are dedicated to discussing, understanding, incorporating, and sustaining play in early childhood education.

### **Summary**

The current educational mandates in early childhood education seem to have shifted from a developmental process involving the whole child to that of academic measurement primarily through direct teacher instruction. The changes in kindergarten pedagogy over the past decade appear to have caused concern for teachers and early childhood scholars (Carlsson-Paige et al., 2015; Fleer, 2011; Miller & Almon, 2009). Vygotsky (1978) argued, “development in children never follows school learning the way a shadow follows the object it casts” (p. 91). If this were the case, it may be valuable for teachers in the 21st century to have knowledge of the complexities and the advantages of play in terms of understanding the role that life experiences may have in educational practice. To gain insight into the lived experiences of play of five kindergarten teachers from northern New England, the qualitative approach of IPA was implemented. The following section provides a literature review of play-based pedagogy in early childhood environments.

## Section 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this IPA was to gather the lived experiences of five kindergarten teachers from northern New England on the nature of play through prereflective description and reflective interpretation in terms of how play manifests in curriculum planning and classroom arrangement. Due to an apparent shift in kindergarten pedagogy over the past two decades, there seems to be a lack of understanding of teachers' lived experiences of play in terms of curriculum planning and classroom arrangement (Sherwood & Reifel, 2013). According to Miller and Almon (2009), there is less than 30 minutes of play per day for kindergarteners. Waltson (2013) articulated a 27% decline in dramatic play along with a 24% decline in sand and water play since 1999. Although teachers believe that play serves an important role in children's lives (Moon & Reifel, 2008), there is discrepancy between teachers' beliefs and classroom practices (Sherwood & Reifel, 2013). Kindergarten teachers report that less child-centered play-based learning is taking place in the classroom (Miller & Almon 2009).

Due to the unequivocal and personal nature of play, play has multiple understandings, perceptions, experiences, and applications. Frost et al. (2012) argued how others understand play activities is just as complex as understanding the act of play itself. Researchers and scholars agree that play is too ambiguous to define in terms of one universal definition and scholars also agree that play is an essential element in child development and learning (Johnson, Eberle, Henricks & Kushner, 2015; Miller & Almon, 2009; Moon & Reifel, 2008; Sherwood & Reifel, 2013). In order to recognize the

role that play has in kindergarten, it is important to gain a deeper understanding of teachers' lived experiences of the nature of play. The following sections provide the conceptual framework for this research combined with a comprehensive synthesis of play-based pedagogy.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study was based on the perceptions of social and cultural constructivism. Social constructivism is a knowledge-oriented approach to understanding educational settings and problems, and the social and cultural experience of teacher and student interactions can support deeper understanding in terms of play (Smith et al., 2009; Woodland, 2006; Vygotsky 1978). A central phenomenon is best understood within the context of historical, social, and cultural experiences. For the purposes of this study, the central phenomenon of play was defined as an active, hands on, engaging, and personal present-moment experience (Brown; 2009; Frost et al., 2012). To best understand the phenomenon of play, it was beneficial to understand how social interactions and culture influence the play experience of kindergarten teachers.

Historically, Piaget (1962) argued that children build knowledge and schema through a ritualistic process of imitations, assimilations, and accommodations. Piaget (1962) argued that children construct thinking and language skills through four cognitive stages from birth to 12 years old. The first two stages of learning occur between the ages of birth and seven years old when children learn through reflexes, senses, perceptions, and through playful or what Piaget called, *ludic* activities. The second two stages of development occur from the ages of seven to 12 when reasoning, concepts, and

hypothesis can also be executed through play-based activities (Piaget, 1962). Piaget (1962) argued that as children move through the different cognitive stages of development their play experiences change because “play is in reality one of the aspects of any activity” (p. 105). Vygotsky (1978) shared a similar developmental perspective, yet believed that it was quite possible that the developmental process lags behind the learning process. Vygotsky (1978) also posited that the combined interactions of social, cultural, or environmental factors influence the rate of development.

Vygotsky (1978) suggested that “play is not the predominant feature of childhood, but it is a leading factor” (p. 101). Vygotsky argued that play opens the path to the zone of proximal development, and if actual development has reached maturity, then the possibility of learning beyond the present developmental stage can happen within the zone of proximal development. Similarly, Rogoff (2003) and Montessori (1995) articulated not only the importance of social interactions in terms of learning and play, but also the role of the environment in learning and development. Rogoff (2003) posited that human development takes root within the context of familiar aspects of the environment in that children’s participation or play in a community often takes place through the observation and through the imitation of different community roles witnessed by children. Montessori (1995) also claimed that the factors and relationships in any environment allow a child to “absorb the customs and habits of the land” (p. 63). Likewise, Sutton-Smith (1997) articulated the importance of acknowledging the social and cultural connection to play because play in early childhood is more often than not reflected within the context of the social world through adaptation, growth, and



socialization. The conceptual framework for this study is rooted in Vygotsky's social constructivist framework because it is possible that the essence of teachers' lived play experiences is most likely constructed through social interactions. The following pages contain a synthesized version of the literature on play-based learning that begins with a kaleidoscope of definitions.

### **Literature Search**

The content of the literature review was attained from early childhood peer-reviewed journals and primary sources available in early child literature and textbooks. This literature review was conducted through the Walden library multidisciplinary database, Thoreau SAGE, ProQuest, and ScienceDirect. In addition, research was also conducted through the ERIC educational database. I used a combination of the following search terms: *teacher perceptions*, *early childhood education*, *play-based learning*, *developmental education*, *kindergarten pedagogy*, *playful learning*, *imaginative learning*, and *learning and development*. In addition, dissertations, books, articles, and the Internet were utilized to support the collection and organization of the literature.

### **Literature Review**

The history of childhood play can be depicted in classical artwork as early as the Sung Dynasty (960-1129). For more than 15 decades, scholars from multiple disciplines have researched the importance of childhood play with varied definitions and points of view (Frost et al., 2012). Although pioneers in the field of early childhood education such as Froebel, Dewey, Pestalozzi, Montessori, Piaget, and Vygotsky all shared a similar view on the importance of play in early child development, they also had different

descriptors of play experiences (Mooney, 2013). In essence, play has become an enigmatic word with multiple meanings, experiences, and contradictions. To develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of play, it was necessary to convey the common defining and uniting words that are most often articulated throughout the literature.

As a starting point to the explanation of play, some scholars and researchers define play as fun, ambiguous, free, adaptive, purposeless, motivating, and requiring involvement (Brown, 2009; Dewey, 1938; Rogoff, 2003; Sutton-Smith, 1997). Furthermore, play is considered to be voluntary, active, physical, symbolic, natural, imaginative, improvisational, and a representation of real and imaginative experiences (Brown, 2009; Jones & Reynolds, 2011; Sluss, 2005). Researchers and scholars have also defined play as useful, private, spontaneous, explorative, powerful, interactive, satisfying, a child's work, assimilation, accommodation, and experiential (Brown, 2009; Cople & Bredekamp, 2012; Dewey 1938; Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009; Green, Crenshaw & Langtiw, 2009; Piaget, 1962; Sluss, 2005; Sutton-Smith, 1997; Vygotsky, 1978; Woolf, 2008). Lastly, play is also understood to be a complex integrated and interactive cognitive, social, emotional, or therapeutic present moment experience throughout human growth and development (Henricks, 2014; Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). At any point in time, play can be defined as one or combination of the above attributes.

According to Brown (2009), "there is no true way to understand play without also understanding the feelings connected to the play because play is done for its own sake" (p. 19). By the same token, Sutton-Smith (1997) determined that "play is a complex

developmental form and that the greatest importance about play is the way in which persons develop within it” (p. 45). Furthermore, Vygotsky (1978) argued how “children satisfy certain needs while engaged in play” and stressed the importance of understanding the uniqueness of play in terms of child satisfaction (p. 85). Lastly, Friedrich Froebel, known as the father of the kindergarten movement in that late 1800s in Germany, believed that children’s vitality and excitement for learning are increased during play experiences at school (Manning, 2005). Although there is not one universal definition or experience of play and there are varying perceptions and experiences, the phenomenon of play is still considered by early childhood experts to be a sovereign act that has favorable influences on early child development and learning (Miller & Almon, 2009; Reynolds, Stagnitti, & Kidd, 2011; Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2013).

Play is considered to be an essential element in early childhood pedagogy primarily because play is the most natural and meaningful way that children build relationships, learn different concepts, construct knowledge, self-regulate, and deepen their connection to the world (Copple & Bredekamp, 2010; de Souza, 2012; Hyson, 2008; Wohlwend & Pepler, 2015; Vygotsky, 1978). According to Sutton-Smith (1997), play is a complex form of development akin to the brain; just as the brain begins in a high state of potentiality, so does play. Play seems to be a venue for open-ended representations that can be connected in a multitude of ways to child development and learning (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Play is considered to be a dominant feature in child development and early learning in which children will experience different types of play throughout childhood through the experience of social participation (Sutton-Smith, 1997; Vygotsky, 1978).

## **The Types of Play and the Stages of Play**

Children engage in different forms of play at different times of development, and during play young children will often demonstrate various levels of cognitive, social, emotional, and physical learning. Although there are over 300 kinds of play (Meckley, 2015), the most common types of play known to early childhood educators are often categorized as functional, constructive, pretend or symbolic, games with rules, and physical (Nilsen, 2014; Sluss, 2005). Other play forms that are less tolerated and often misunderstood by teachers are rough and tumble play, superhero play, and war play (Sluss, 2005). According to LaRue and Kelly (2015), the domains of learning and development do not operate in isolation and that playful and spontaneous interactions impact the growth and learning of young children.

### **Functional Play**

Functional play and the manipulation of objects are considered to be the first play of childhood (Frost, et al., 2012; Sluss, 2005). According to Piaget (1962), children engage in functional play during the sensorimotor period of development that ranges from birth to 24 months. However, functional play does not only occur in the early stages of development as it can carry over throughout other activities. For example, children who repetitively go up and down the slide or swing on swings perform functional play seen on playground equipment (Sluss, 2005). Functional play experiences may include repetitive and explorative actions such as a baby shaking a rattle or a preschooler putting together puzzles or stringing beads (Frost et al., 2012; Wilson, 2015). In addition, functional play could also be repetitive language or babbling. During functional play,

children are often seen repetitively manipulating objects or language in a pleasurable fashion (Frost et al., 2012). Wooden blocks, a mainstay in many kindergarten environments, may start out as a form of functional play opportunities, but blocks are most often connected to constructive play.

### **Constructive Play**

In constructive play, children move from repetitively manipulating objects to using the imagination to create, build, experiment, and develop new ideas (Frost et al., 2012). Constructive play involves hands on building, inventing, creating, planning, problem solving, imagination, and trial and error. In addition, constructive play influences mathematical, artistic, and scientific imagination (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Leong & Bodrova, 2012; Pirrone & Di Nuovo, 2014). According to Drew, Christie, Johnson, Meckley and Nell (2008), constructive play is open-ended, organized and goal oriented in that children build, invent, and make things. Other forms of play that are often considered to be constructive play involve three-dimensional materials such as creative art experiences, clay, water, and sand play. Another example of constructive play is known as loose parts and is defined by Daly & Beloglovsky (2015) as “alluring beautiful objects and materials that children can move, manipulate, control, and change during play” (p. 3). Both constructive and dramatic play includes the construction of language, knowledge, and the use of imagination.

## **Dramatic Play**

Dramatic play is also known as the housekeeping area and is considered the place where pretend/symbolic play is most often experienced. Dramatic play is most often associated with pretend or make-believe play that has the potential to influence social skills, problem solving skills, emotional development, or oral and receptive language skills (Singer, Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek, 2006). However, Lillard, Lerner, Hopkins, Dore, Smith, and Palmquist (2013) argued that although there is consistent research that claims pretend play impacts language, narrative, and emotional regulation, there is no compelling evidence to support that pretend play causes development in these areas. Nevertheless, Lillard, et al. (2013) argued that pretend play is one of the many possible routes to positive language development.

Symbolic or pretend play during story retelling or dramatic play influences vocabulary development, literacy connections, and social or cultural awareness (Baker-Sennet et al. 2008; Welsch, 2008; Wohlwend, 2011). Lillard et al. (2013) posited that there is indeed evidence to suggest the possibility that pretend play correlates to development in language and narrative; however, it is equally important to note that correlation does not mean causation. Wohlwend (2011) argued that play is a literacy skill such as reading, speaking, and writing and Fleer (2011) reported that the cognitive skills of literacy and math are often embedded in dramatic play experiences. Dramatic play experiences seem to offer a space for kindergarten children to combine many literacy skills through natural and narrative expressions (Wohlwend, 2011). Begeen and Fromberg (2009) argued that play facilitates social interaction, emotional regulation, creativity, and

higher cognitive processing into the middle years of development. Not only are there different types of play but also there are also different levels of what Parten (1933) called social participation that children demonstrate during free play experiences.

### **Social Participation**

According to Parten (1933), social participation depends largely on the age and nursery school experience. Parten (1933) also emphasized a possible relationship between intelligent quotients of children and social participation. In a more recent study, Wilson (2015) found that high ability children spent more time in functional, dramatic, and solitary play. Parten (1933) described the six categories of social participation that are also known as social stages of play: unoccupied, onlooker, solitary, parallel, associative, and cooperative. For example, the unoccupied child often does not play but watches anything that happens in the moment. The onlooker child often watches others and will often talk to others who are playing or even ask questions. The solitary child often is within speaking distance of others and has a focus interest on his own play with no attempt to engage with others. Parallel play is more social than solitary play. The parallel child plays alone but moves towards other children and plays with items that are like the other children but plays beside others instead of with them. The associative child often interacts with others in a less organized way while the cooperative child often interacts with others in a more organized play and often assigns group roles or follows group rules. Broadhead (2006) suggested that the Social Play Continuum model could be used to observe children in social play as it can serve as an assessment tool that reflects the development of a social learning process. Broadhead (2006) argued that extended

observations of social play offer more insight to teachers in terms of developmental social progression. Additionally, for teachers to understand the phenomenon of play, it is helpful for teachers to have knowledge about the different types of play that children engage in and the different levels of social participation that often accompany social interactions (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Nilsen, 2014; Sluss, 2005). How children interact within the learning environment is an early childhood domain is referred to as approaches to learning.

Approaches to learning are used in many early childhood standards and involves children's behaviors, dispositions, tendencies, or typical patterns of learning in different situations (Hyson, 2008). Hyson (2008), posited that how children approach learning relates to both their emotions and their behaviors. According to Hyson (2008), excitement and enthusiasm are essential for learning to take place. Enthusiasm for learning includes three categories: interest, pleasure, and motivation to learn, whereas engagement in learning includes four categories: attention, persistence, flexibility, and self-regulation (Hyson, 2008). The categories in this framework are very similar to some of the key words use by scholars and researchers to describe play. The categories embedded in the approaches to learning are essential because interest, pleasure, and motivation seem to be indicators of school readiness across all domains of learning.

Hyson (2008) stated that many early childhood educators have reported how more and more children begin their early school years unenthusiastic and disengaged. Hyson (2008) posited that rushed or rigid schedules, teaching methods, and unsupportive relationships may contribute to such emotions and behaviors demonstrated in young



children. The needs of kindergarten children appear to be many and it is important to figure out the best way to educate young children (Ray & Smith, 2010). Samuelsson and Carlsson (2008) articulated that children learn by being active and that children are often interested in the here and now and it is important for teachers to pay attention to the inner drives and interests of young children.

### **The Influence of Play on Child Development and Early Learning**

Among the surplus of early childhood research it is revealed that young children learn best when engaged in play experiences. Additionally, it is within the context of play where the spark for academia takes root (Brown, 2009; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Fleer, 2013; LaRue & Kelly, 2015; Leong & Bodrova, 2012; Miller & Almon, 2009; Woolf, 2013). Children's play experiences are considered central to the construction of scientific thinking, language and vocabulary development, mathematical principle, creative thinking, collaborative problem solving, physical growth, and social and emotional development (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2013; Fleer, 2013; LaRue & Kelly, 2015; Walston, 2013). Because of the lack of evidenced based research on pretend play, Lillard et al. (2013) articulated that pretend play would be one of many avenues to positive developmental outcomes, but that, at this point in time, pretend play cannot be seen as a cause of development. On the contrary, Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff (2013) argued that irrespective of the flawed research, it is important to note that there are still substantial links between pretend play and learning.

It appears that children intrinsically know how to play, and the play experience is what children know best because it involves active engagement (Hyson, 2008; Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013; Wohlwend & Pepler, 2015). Play seems to be the most natural venue for children to learn and practice pro-social skills, self-expression, communication, language, literacy, imaginative learning, self-control, and cognitive understanding, (Brown 2009; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Rogoff, 2003; Sutton-Smith, 1997; Wohlwend, 2011; Vygotsky 1978). Play is considered to be one of the most meaningful ways that children interact with life, especially during the first seven years of development (de Souza, 2012). Vygotsky (1978) stated, “a child’s greatest self-control occurs in play” (p. 9). Paradoxically, the complex and ambiguous nature of play is what inadvertently unites social, emotional, physical, and cognitive domains of development and early learning (Weisberg et al., 2013). Lastly, a play-based approach to learning seems to enhance social and emotional development as well as language and cognitive development (Fleer, 2013). Montessori (1995) stated that children who lack power or opportunities can become difficult and knowing how to offer a therapeutic environment that leads to improvement of the child’s character is valuable in early childhood classrooms.

### **A Therapeutic Connection to Play**

The 21<sup>st</sup> century kindergarten seems to have shifted from a garden of wonder and delight to a space of stress and demands (Miller & Almon, 2009; Russell, 2011). Children deal with difficulties and hardships everyday. According to Green, Crenshaw and Langtiw (2009), children’s play themes can be indicative of current developmental

struggles or nuances. Some of the most common play themes shown by children in and out of therapy are: cleaning, nurturing, mastery, exploration, separation, death, power, aggression, and constancy (Green et al., 2009). For example, one third of preschool children play out death themes and death themes that can signal a variety of potential emotions such as trauma, grief, loss, rage, or separation anxiety (Green et al., 2009). Although, it is often the job of a counselor or play therapist to know how to handle the therapeutic side to child development, Hootman, Houck and King (2003) argued, “school personnel are potentially key agents in the socialization of children” (p. 3). School personnel and parents should have a basic understanding and training of play as a therapeutic outlet because when children need support, there is often no trained help immediately available (Hootman et al., 2003). Furthermore, Gray (2011) and Louv (2008) argued that opportunities for children to engage in play at home, school, or outdoors are on a continuous decline and that the decline in play can also lead to mental health concerns.

Gray (2011) articulated that a decline in play also means a decline in children’s mental health, and Panksepp (2015) also argued the rise in childhood disorders such as attention deficit disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, and depression may be a reflection of how cultural and social changes impact children’s interactions and play. Additionally, the psychotropic drug prescriptions for children five and under has a tripled over the past several years leading to the speculation that a decrease in play opportunities has taken away the very conduit that children use to cope with emotional dissonance (Blair, 2007; Gray, 2013; Panksepp, 2015). Johnson, Eva, Johnson, and Walker (2011)

found that one in five young children have some sort of mental, behavioral, or emotional problem; one in eight have a serious depression; and one in ten have a severe emotional problem. Gray (2011) argued that the decline in play in both school and home has contributed to the rise in psychopathology of young people. According to Hootman et al., (2003), public schools ought to be equipped to support the development of young children especially during a time when mental health concerns are on the rise and playful opportunities seem to be barren (Gray 2013). Miller and Almon (2009) argued that schools and society should “promote emotional health and not exacerbate illness” (p. 11) by creating schools that implement developmentally appropriate play-based learning environments designed to support emotional development and coping skills. Meanwhile, Berger and Lahad (2010) suggested that what is needed in kindergarten are playful spaces. According to Berger and Lahad (2010), a playful space in kindergarten is a place designated for children to learn to build resiliency channels and to learn how to appropriately express themselves especially if faced with situations that may involve trauma.

In an effort to build resiliency in children after the Second Lebanese War, Berger and Lahad (2010) instituted the Safe Place Programme in kindergartens in Israel. The Safe Place Programme is a resiliency model designed to support emotional awareness and healing. Berger and Lahad conducted an experimental study designed to help children build resiliency through playful and imaginative story telling. The experimental study allowed children the space to play, act, draw, and share their feelings. There were 12 two-hour sessions when the children pretended to be the forest rangers and planted trees and

built nesting boxes and feeding stations to recover the burning forest. The findings from the study contributed to the unification of a community, reduced anxiety, lessened violence, and boosted children's self-confidence. Berger and Lahad (2010) posited that a Safe Place Programme could support other countries or schools dealing with health, stress, or disaster in a playful and developmentally appropriate manner. Throughout the myriad of definitions and understandings of play, play is also considered a therapeutic and healing experience (Woolf, 2008).

Woolf (2008) set out to implement a school-based play intervention program to reduce counseling and discipline referrals by training teachers to become informed observers of children's play. Training was offered to all school staff about the nature of free play and how to foster children's growth through the struggles and strengths noticed during a play experience. Woolf (2013) reported that conflict is a natural part of play, social relationships, and life. Additionally, Woolf articulated how acceptance can allow for more flexibility in children's play in terms of understanding the complexity of emotions and social behaviors involved. Woolf's (2008) found that when staff learned new skills, a new personal understanding of child development, attachment, and relationships occurred.

Generally, school nurses, guidance counselors, or social workers are often responsible for the emotional aspects of students' health in schools. However, the increase of emotional and behavioral challenges suggests that the role of all school personal may need to be multidimensional (Hootman et al., 2003) in order to embrace the increase of mental health concerns in young children. Berger and Lahad (2010) argued

that a kindergarten teacher has an important role in the emotional development of children separate from the psychotherapist or counselor, but equally as critical.

Kindergarten teachers seem to be faced with a daily task of supporting young children's emotional highs and lows, and knowledge of therapeutic play can serve children who may need emotional support. Lastly, Fearn, and Howard (2012) argued that all professionals who work with children need to be trained in the developmental and therapeutic potential of play because it provides a space where children's development can be observed, nurtured, and supported.

### **A Social Emotional Connection to Play**

Social and emotional development is considered to have long lasting consequences in growth and development beyond elementary school (Begen and Fromberg, 2009; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Mraz, Porcelli, & Tyler, 2016). It is during the early years that young children form the necessary attachments with adults and peers that support overall emotional and social development (Hyson, 2008). Kindergarten children play with peers who have similar interests and behaviors and it is during pretend play that children have the opportunities to develop and expand pro social skills, problem solving, and imagination (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Panksepp, 2015; Reynolds, Stegnitti, & Kidd, 2011). In many kindergarten classrooms, it seems to be expected that young children know how to self regulate, problem solve, interact appropriately with peers, and appropriately express feelings (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Hyson, 2008). The one area of play in the kindergarten classroom that has been associated with the

development of such skills appears to be dramatic or socio-dramatic play (Miller & Almon, 2009).

Dramatic or socio-dramatic (pretend) play sets the stage for real life cooperation, self-regulation, and problem solving (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Hyson, 2008). Copple and Bredekamp (2009) argued that dramatic or make-believe play is crucial to the development of social and self-regulation skills because this type of play allows children time to act out situations and allows children opportunity to communicate with understanding and empathy. Lillard et al. (2103) suggested that pretend play is useful because it facilitates positive interactions, but that there is no evidence to show how pretend play causes self-regulation and social development. Reynolds, Stegnitti, and Kidd (2011) stated that children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds not only start school with lower academic readiness but also start school with lower socio-dramatic play skills. Reynolds et al. (2011) conducted a study that found that children who attended play-based schools showed significant improvement in both social interaction and language development. According to the results from the Penn Interactive Play Scale (PIPPS) administered by Reynolds et al. (2011), children who demonstrated competency in peer situations were seen as flexible and creative compared to those who have not developed stories or learned to sustain playful situations. Reynolds et al. (2011) reported that children who attended play-based schools had a significant increase in elaborate play abilities over a six-month period compared to children in a traditional school. For example, typical play indicators on the PIPPS included spontaneous self-initiate play, extend play, follow through (after set up the play scene), and develop narrative play.

After six months, Reynolds et al. (2011) argued that children in the play-based school were significantly advanced in their play abilities compared to the children in the traditional school, with the biggest indicator of children's actual performance being spontaneous self-initiated play rather than adult-directed play. Furthermore, children's social and emotional skills seem to improve and develop through play-based opportunities when adults are present to observe and model appropriate skills (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Hyson, 2008; Jones & Reynolds, 2011).

In a study by Fantuzzo, Sekino, and Cohen (2004), children's cooperative and collaborative skills in unstructured play are not only related to peer acceptance and motivation to learn, but children's self regulation and social awareness are also related to an increase in children's early literacy and numeracy outcomes. Hoffman and Russ (2012) suggested that pretend play not only supports emotional regulation, but also gives children the opportunity to develop the executive functioning skills for planning, persistence, mental flexibility, working memory, and inhibitory control. Executive functioning skills are very similar to approaches to learning and comprise the overall characteristics of play pedagogy. Likewise, Wohlwend (2011) argued that pretend play creates space for children to create and sustain shared meanings through talk and enactment. Further, Hoffman and Russ (2012) suggested that there is a relationship between pretend play, creativity, and divergent thinking, and it is the act of pretend play that supports divergent thinking in that ideas, narrative stories, and imagination are generated. According to Hoffman and Russ (2012), there is a cognitive process to pretend play that weaves emotions, contexts, associations, symbolic thinking, problem solving,



and expression into one arena of creativity and imagination. Cognitive development is often described and associated with academic skills in terms of thinking, problem solving, language development, literacy, math, and science concepts.

### **A Cognitive Connection to Play**

Cognitive development increases when children are engaged in play experiences (Fleer, 2011; Miller & Almon, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978). Piaget (1962) and Vygotsky (1978) stressed the importance of play as a way to help children develop cognitively. Fleer (2011) gathered video documentation over a 15-day period that showed evidence of how academic concepts are naturally formed through imaginative play experiences. Wohlwend (2014) argued “we can recognize play as a powerful literacy that creates social spaces rich with opportunities and rife with pitfalls” (p. 79) A recent study called Design Play Shop and Squishy Circuits conducted by Wohlwend et al. (2015) revealed that children who stayed more engaged throughout play solved the challenge and deepened their learning and concepts. Furthermore, a comparison study of six-year old children conducted by Reynolds et al. (2011) showed significant gains in narrative language, semantic language, elaborate play, and social skills in children from a play based classroom compared to those in a more direct instruction-based classroom. Similarly, an experimental study by Bellin, Singer, and Singer (2006) suggested that children who are engaged in playful learning make significant gains in emergent literacy skills.

Wohlwend (2011) argued that play is literacy and “children use play to access literate identities as reader, writers, and designers” (p. 6). During play young children

develop and own the language and vocabulary necessary to acquire pre-reading and math skills (Anders & Rossbach, 2015). When children are engaged in playful experiences the brain is activated for learning (Panksepp, 2015). Additionally, Ginsburg (2006) suggested that early math concepts such as shape, space, measurement, and magnitude occur in the everyday play of young children, and Pirrone and Di Nuovo (2014) reported a relationship between block building games and the cognitive skills of mental imagery and mathematical reasoning. Likewise, Clements et al. (2006) demonstrated that play and imagination impact computational skills along with imaginative skills and Seo and Ginsburg (2006) revealed that regardless of social class four and five year old children utilize the three mathematical categories of shape, magnitude, and enumeration during play.

According to Seo and Ginsburg (2006), 46% of a 15-minute period of a child's natural play consists of mathematical principles. Panksepp (2015) argued that play is instinctual and emerges at the right time, and as young children play, meaning is constructed through observation, questioning, and problem solving. Playful interactions could also be seen as the emergence of the scientific process. Bulunuz (2013) reported that children developed science concepts through playful hands-on experiences. In a quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test design, Bulunuz (2013) argued that kindergarten children who were taught science through play had a greater understanding than those who were taught through direction instruction. Science concepts seem to instinctually be applied when young children are actively engaged in activities such as running outdoors, building ramps for cars, playing with water and sand, and even filling a cup of milk.

LaRue and Kelly (2015) argued that the exploratory play of even very young children appears to reflect some of the logic of scientific inquiry because children are developing their own intuitive compass of mental processes.

Neuroscientists argued that the brain is hardwired for play and play emerges from what Panksepp (2015) called the system of enthusiasm, also known in neuroscience as the medial forebrain bundle (MFB). Eberle (2011) suggested that the neurological connective process of play keeps the mind sharp and that children learn best through projects, inquiry, and curiosity. Furthermore, the personal meaning constructed through playful experiences supports academic demands later in school, especially when these experiences are co-created by a teacher who understands the multifaceted dimensions of play-based learning (Brown, 2009; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Jones & Reynolds 2011; McInnes, Howard, Miles, & Crowley, 2009; Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008). Lastly, Dewey (1938) argued that development and learning is a give and take between teacher and student and that planning should include time for meaningful free play.

### **The Teacher's Role in Play**

According to Gray (2013), school has taken hold of children's lives through the attitudinal premise that children learn by doing tasks that are directed and assessed by adults. When children are engaged in playful experiences, teachers gain insight into child development and early learning because play experiences of young children can be used to integrate subject matter, teach social skills, support emotional development, or extend concepts (Drew et al., 2008; Duluca & Hughes, 2010; Fleer, 2011; Jones & Reynolds, 2011; Larsson, 2013; Ranz-Smith, 2012; Samuelson & Carlsson, 2008;). Larsson (2013)

found that children's play is learning, and has personal meaning even if the play appears to be off task or different than the adult's perspective. One way to broaden teacher perspective of play is through observation. Observation is the pathway to what role is necessary for the teacher to take in play experiences (Broadhead, 2006; Jones & Reynolds, 2011). During playful experiences a teacher has the opportunity to gain insight about the child's present moment learning or has an opportunity to guide learning to another level (Fleer, 2011; Larsson, 2013). Play and learning are often separated in terms of pedagogy, and in order to understand and teach children, knowledge of play-based learning is necessary in the early childhood classroom (Larsson, 2013). According to Synodi (2010), play pedagogy is an integrative approach that involves "the pros of teacher-directed and child-directed activities" (p. 188). The teacher's role in play is to apply and integrate the skills of observation, listening, facilitation, and participation, as well as to combine a balanced implementation of three approaches to learning; child-directed, teacher-directed, and mutually-directed (Berger & Lahad, 2010; DeLuca & Hughes, 2014; Larsson, 2013; Sameulsson & Carlsson, 2008; Ranz-Smith, 2012; Wood, 2009). There are six ways that a teacher can contribute to the play of children. A teacher may take on the role of a stage manager, mediator, player, scribe, assessor and communicator, or planner (Jones & Reynolds, 2011). The role of the stage manager may be to arrange the environment with props to invite children to experiment or play with a certain idea or concept. The mediator may contribute to play through conflict resolution, problem solving, and expansion of communication skills. The player joins in the actual play script but keeps her agenda outside of the child-directed play scenario. The scribe

takes notes and makes drawings of what is happening during play. The scribe is also modeling how to observe and record small moments in the lives of others. The assessor and communicator role allows for observations to be carried over in terms of assessment and goal setting for the students. The planner notices the play scripts or play themes observed during play and finds ways to include the interests of the children into the existing unit of study or begins to plan the next idea of learning into literacy or math or science. The teachers' role in the play of young children is multilayered and has the potential to create developmentally appropriated play-based learning that not only meets the play needs of the students but also meets some of the standards set for learning academic skills

Teachers' observation skills and knowledge of child development can guide instructional practice (Broadhead, 2006; Berger & Lahad 2010; Woolf, 2013). During the act of play the imagination of young children is activated to make meaning, construct knowledge, or understand reality (Baker-Sennet, Matusov, & Rogoff, 2008; Fler, 2011; Wolf, 2013; Vygotsky, 1978). Observation is a present moment noticing of a child's interactions, play, and learning. Informal and formal observations of young children can be performed within free play, guided play, physical play, in a group, or one on one (DeLuca & Hughes, 2014). A classroom teacher should be cognizant of children's play in terms of development and learning in order to know when and how to support children's learning (Wood, 2009). Observation is one key to unlocking the complexities of development and play.

Edwards and Culter-Mckenzie (2013) articulated that teachers are more apt to prepare and engage in play-based learning if they trust in the value and the concept of play. Fler (2011) argued that a dialectal model of play supports the intellectual development of young children because it initiates a social interaction between teacher and child or among children themselves. Paradoxically, although it may be necessary for teachers to know the elements of play, children should also have time to direct and initiate their own play activities (Brown, 2009; Fler 2011; Gray, 2011; 2009; Miller & Almon, 2009; Montessori, 1995; Russell 2011). Samuelsson and Carlsson (2008) argued that teachers must take time to gain the child's perspective during play in order to fully understand the depth of learning that takes place.

The ability of teachers to move from observation and listening to facilitation and participation takes desire, intention, knowledge, skill, training, patience, and trust. A model by Wood and Attfield (2015) integrates four pedagogical zones, perspectives, and actions of teacher and children. The pedagogical zones incorporate adult and child initiated ideas with work and non-play and with playfulness or what Wood (2015) calls pure play. Similarly, Miller and Almon (2009) suggested that a classroom include child-initiated play that involves active exploration within the presence of teacher's facilitation to offer a balance between child-initiated and teacher-guided actions. Ranz-Smith (2012) posited a play-work paradigm that is nestled within Gardner's (2007) *Five Minds for the Future*. The five include creating, synthesizing, disciplined, respectful, and ethical minds and are merged with a play-work paradigm that establishes room for 'true' play (child-initiated free play), mediated play (guided play), mediated work (playful approaches to

learning), and ‘true’ work (employment of skills to complete teacher-directed task). The play-work paradigm allows for all voices to be heard: the children’s ideas, the teacher’s ideas, and the voices behind learning standards. Ranz-Smith (2012) argued that the play-work paradigm secures a space for play in early childhood classroom, leaves room for professional development, and allows for a balanced compromise with the standards-based movement and play-based pedagogy. According to Jones and Reynolds (2011), the role of the teacher regarding play is critical to child development and early learning, yet many teachers are unsure of how to incorporate themselves into the play experience.

### **Teacher Perceptions of Play**

There appear to be many different ways to create a kindergarten environment that fosters development and learning. Research suggested a pedagogy that embraces both teacher-led and child-led activities has the best outcomes in terms of reaching the whole child. (Daniels, 2014; Hewes 2010; Howard 2010; Parahan, 2012; McInnes et al., 2010; Ranz-Smith, 2007). However, because the evidence of play-based learning has is ambivalent to what Lillard et al. (2013) called play *ethos*, many schools appear to move towards a more didactic approach to instruction instead of a play-based. Additionally, there is also discrepancy between theory, beliefs, and practice (Abry et al., 2015; Howard, 2010; Hunkin, 2014; McInnis, Howard, Miles & Crowley, 2011; Pardhan, 2012; Ranz-Smith, 2007; Sherwood & Reifel, 2010; Wildger & Scholfield, 2012). Howard (2010) articulated that teachers believe that play in early childhood encourages flexibility and autonomous thinking but their own professional development experience did not allow for the same conditions. Although teachers believe that play is important and

necessary in early childhood, they are equally unclear of their role in play due to a lack of training and knowledge coupled with personal perceptions, experiences, and curricular demands (Howard, 2010; Hunkin, 2014; Pardhan, 2012). Play appears to be considered a space where teachers can learn who their students are in terms of development and learning.

According to Pardhan (2012) teachers perceive that children learn best through play but many teachers often lean predominately towards a teacher-led environment because of top down pressure, lack of time or training in play-based pedagogy, and deep seeded beliefs that direct teaching is the best way for children to learn. Teachers will either under or over manage the play experiences of young children mostly due to a lack of understanding of play theory (McInnes, et al., 2011; Ranz-Smith, 2007). Many teachers are not comfortable with and do not necessarily trust child-led or child-initiated play due to a lack of play knowledge, experience, and pressure to prepare children for the next grade (McInnes, et al., 2012; Ranz-Smith, 2007). Nevertheless, early childhood teachers believe that play is integral to social participation, self-control, and overall psychosocial development (Berkhout et al., 2010; McInnes, et al., 2011).

Lived experiences or perceptions seem to have the power to shape any environment. Teachers' lived experiences in terms of the nature of play are under represented in literature, and since the No Child Left Behind Act, 2001, 2002 and the Common Core Standards, little is known about early childhood teacher experiences and perspectives in terms of play-based pedagogy (Hunkin, 2014; Sherwood & Reifel, 2010). According to Pardhan (2012), additional research is needed to understand how teacher



perceptions, views, or lived experiences impact pedagogy. This study described and interpreted the lived experiences of the phenomenon of play. Furthermore, the addition of teachers' lived experiences to the early childhood literature has the potential to broaden thinking about play-based pedagogy as well as contribute to the professional conversation, literature, and practice by gathering descriptions of the lived experiences of the nature of play by five kindergarten teachers from northern New England.

### **Summary**

Play appears to be the common denominator throughout the domains of child development and early learning. Although play is not easy to define, play appears to have a substantial place in early childhood. Imagination is considered to be one of the keys to building concept formation because children use their imagination to think about concepts in a relational and meaningful way (Fleer, 2013). Play in the kindergarten environment appears to merge exploration with imagination so to represent a shared meaning and social networking (Drew et al., 2008; Mraz, Porcelli & Tyler, 2016). According to Katz (2015), it is the obligation of early childhood teachers to provide a wide range of experiences and contexts that will stimulate children's innate intellectual life long skills of reasoning, questioning, predicting, hypothesizing, and investigating through play.

Imagination has untapped potential that is often seen through the play experiences of young children. The significance of this research was that it addressed the lived experiences of professionals who work directly with imaginative kindergarten children. The descriptions and experiences of those who engage directly with children have the

power to enhance professional discussion and practice in terms of understanding the ambivalent complexities of play-based learning in a standards-based educational system. Furthermore, teachers' experiences need to be known and understood to create professional learning communities dedicated to playing in kindergarten. An inquiry of the lived experiences of the nature of play appears to be justified if kindergarten children are to maintain their natural state of wonder and curiosity in the classroom setting

An IPA was used to gain insight about the lived experiences of the nature of play through the qualitative methods of LED's and semistructured interviews. LED's are written lived experiences. Gathering the context of teachers' experiences was important data to acquire since lived play experiences inevitably contribute to the culture of a school community. Section 3 describes the methodology employed for this qualitative phenomenological study. The following section includes an introduction, a research design and rationale, the methodology, role of the researcher, data collection and analysis and summary.

### Section 3: Research Method

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this IPA was to gather the lived experiences of the nature of play of five kindergarten teachers from northern New England through prereflective description and reflective interpretation in terms of how play manifests in curriculum planning and classroom arrangement. In order to better understand how teachers made sense of the play experience, an IPA was employed. Phenomenology is a philosophical movement founded by Edmund Husserl that is used in research to describe and interpret the phenomenon of a lived experience in-depth through a first person point of view (Smith et al., 2009; van Manen, 2014). For the purpose of this study, the phenomenon called *play* was defined as an active, hands-on, engaging, and personal present moment experience (Frost et al., 2012). The objective in phenomenology is to uncover, to understand, to prereflectively describe, and to reflectively interpret the meanings behind the life-world or lived experience. (Vagle, 2014; van Manen, 2014). The nature of this qualitative study is an IPA that attempts to investigate how people make sense of life (Smith et al., 2009). The following sections contain the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, methodology participants, procedures and plans for data collection and analysis, issues of trustworthiness, and conclusion.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

Phenomenology is a qualitative practice that attempts to recognize, describe, and interpret life experiences through an iterative hermeneutic cycle. IPA research involves a small number of participants in order to deeply explore and understand any differences

and similarities of a shared phenomenon. Smith et al. (2009) articulated that the theoretical foundation for IPA involves phenomenology and hermeneutics. In order to answer the research question (What are the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers regarding the nature of play?), a qualitative phenomenological approach was the best method because phenomenology is less interested in facts and more interested in the nature of the essence of the lived moment (Moran, 2009). According to Smith et al. (2009), phenomenology emphasizes that the human experience and human perspective is essential in educational research. Similarly, Moran (2009) articulated that phenomenology is “reviving our living contact with reality” (p. 5). Van Manen (2014) articulated that phenomenology is an attempt to describe phenomena as it manifests in the experiencer and argued that phenomenology is a hermeneutic spiraling practice rather than a system of methodological procedures.

Phenomenology is designed to empirically describe the lived experience through the eyes of those living it. Prereflective description of everyday natural experiences enhances perceptiveness and provides different kinds of understanding (Vagle, 2014). Smith et al. (2009) stated that founding philosophers Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger posited that one should consciously explore their experiences in order to know more about it and that meaning is formed from the interrelated or overlapping connections to an experience. To understand another’s point of view, it is important to understand how people derive meaning behind the manifestation of their own experiences (Vagle, 2014:van Manen, 2014). Phenomenology is a contrast to other positivistic research because phenomenology does not view theory as something that comes before

practice. (Vagle, 2014; van Manen: 2014). In phenomenology, life is seen as happening first and theory as a result of reflective interpretation. Another integral component of IPA involves the reflective interpretation of the lived experience, which is called hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics is a theory of interpretation known to be used in the explanation of biblical, historical, and literary texts (Smith et al., 2009). According to Smith et al. (2009), a focus on the language the person uses rather than only the meaning is part of the interpretative process. Interpretation is an interchange of understanding the context of the experience and the person involved. Hermeneutics involves a circulative movement of whole to part through a dialogue about the lived experience rather than a description of the essence of the experience (Vagle, 2014). This iterative dynamic of part to whole or whole to part is known as the hermeneutic circle. IPA research involves a back and forth movement of interpretative analysis throughout the hermeneutic circle because meaning can be derived at varying levels of perception and subjectivity and changes through reflective interpretation (Smith et al., 2009; Vagle, 2014). IPA is designed to examine the lived experience through empirical prereflective description and reflective interpretations.

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this IPA was to gather the lived experiences of the nature of play by five kindergarten teachers from northern New England through pre-reflective description and reflective interpretation in terms of how play manifests in curriculum planning and classroom arrangement. A phenomenological approach is the best method to capture the essence of an experience through the lens of those living it. Prereflective

descriptions and reflective interpretations of lived experiences encapsulate the influential factors of society, self, and culture in order to better understand how and why people do what they do (Smith et al., 2009). The central phenomenon called *play* was researched through multiple, partial, or varied contexts through a hermeneutic cycle of inquiry (Vagle, 2014). In phenomenology, the context of the phenomenon may consist of a moment, space, place, or embodiment. I addressed the overarching research question (What are the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers regarding the nature of play?) and the subquestions through a prereflective empirical and reflective hermeneutic interpretative process. Five kindergarten teachers from a northern New England school district participated in this study through a written LED and through conversational semistructured interviews. I gathered data through LEDs, semistructured interviews, and hand written notes to gain insight and understanding of teachers' lived play in a kindergarten setting.

### **Context**

The participants for this study were recruited from a rural public school system in the northern region of New England. A minimum of five participants was necessary to conduct an IPA. Therefore, I recruited six participants for coverage in the event that one participant withdrew. In IPA research, a limited number of participants is required to gather deep insight into a shared phenomenon. With IPA, the aim was to gather examples from five participants “to whom the research will be meaningful” (Smith, et al., 2009, p. 59). Five kindergarten teachers were selected through a purposive convenience sampling strategy because the participants were available, knowledgeable, and willing to take part

in the research. The participant sample allowed for the isolation of participants who had experienced the same phenomena (van Manen, 2014). The delimiter for this study was that the participants must be kindergarten teachers who had taught in a public school system for one year or longer.

Once approval from the Institutional Review Board at Walden University (03-04-16-0407592) was received, I contacted the superintendents from three northern New England school districts to gain permission to access kindergarten teachers within the district. The superintendents served as gatekeepers who connected me to the possible participants of this study. I made the initial contact to the superintendents by telephone to share a preliminary overview of the study and sent a follow-up e-mail that included the same information (Appendix A). Due to the rural geography of northern New England and varying student populations, there were three sites recruited. I sent recruitment letters to the possible participants. The recruitment letter outlined the purpose of this study, criteria for participation, researcher contact information, and notification of the voluntary and confidential nature of participation (Appendix B).

### **Participant Selection and Access to the Participants**

Once the superintendents had electronically agreed to the study, 14 kindergarten teachers from two northern New England school districts were sent a recruitment e-mail with interest from teachers. My first contact with the participants was through e-mail (Appendix C). I sent the purpose of the study and consent form via e-mail. Once an interview was scheduled, the LED protocol was sent a week prior to the scheduled

interview to offer enough time for completion. The interview took place after work hours at the individual schools of each teacher.

### **Ethical Considerations**

I had acquired a certificate of completion from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research offered by Walden University. Once the Institutional Review Board at Walden University granted permission, I recruited the participants through e-mail (Appendix C). This study was designed to minimize any risk to the participant. All of the personal information obtained was kept confidential. No names or school information were identified. If the participants had concerns about privacy, I ensured them that all information gained was strictly confidential. The participants selected for this study signed a consent form that included the purpose, procedures, confidentiality, withdrawal opportunity, and contact information. Interview recordings and personal documents were stored in a lock box and password protected computer. Once transcriptions of the interviews and personal documents were completed and checked for plausibility from the participants, the documents remained stored on a password-protected computer. The data collected will remain stored a maximum of five years as required by Walden University and will be deleted by June 2021.

### **Role of the Researcher**

The role of the researcher was first and foremost to remain in an ethical frame of mind throughout all stages of the research process (Creswell, 2012). I respected the participants as human beings that encompass a variety of experiences and knowledge. In order to gather and to report trustworthy and credible data, my role as a novice



phenomenological researcher was to be less concerned with factual accuracy and more focused on the plausibility and evolution of the lived play experience (van Manen, 2014). I remained neutral and attentive to the emergence of the phenomenon researched.

To develop a level of trust and security, I ensured the participants of confidentiality via written and verbal consent. Once the interview was completed and the data were transcribed, the participants were offered the opportunity for member checks to look for accuracy and plausibility (Creswell, 2012; Vagle, 2014). Although I also shared the role of a kindergarten teacher, the participants were from a different school district where there is no known professional or personal relationship. Lastly, three school districts in northern New England were chosen to be potential research sights because the travel distance was within a 25-mile radius.

### **Data Collection**

These data were gathered from five participants through (LED)'s, semi-structured interviews, and handwritten notes. The LED and the interview protocol are found in Appendix D and Appendix E, respectively. The purpose of the LED was to gain access to teacher's play experience as they lived through it. The LED allowed opportunity for the participants to pre-reflectively write a narrative of play as if they were living through it. The purpose of semi-structured interviews was to gain insight into the lived play experience through a more reflective interpretation and meaningful conversation (Vagle, 2014) that involved probing or clarifying questions depending on the participants' responses (Creswell, 2012; Smith et al., 2009).

The LED is a valid protocol used in phenomenological research and the interview questions are guided by phenomenological procedures of existential inquiry (Vagle, 2014; van Manen, 2014). Furthermore, interviews and LED's are essential criteria for qualitative phenomenological methodology, in particular IPA because it allows the researcher to begin an iterative hermeneutic analysis. IPA is concerned with examining how participants makes sense of or sees their experience. According to Vagle, (2014), Phenomenology is more of a craft than a system in that explanations are not enforced before the phenomenon has been understood from within and interpretation is a hermeneutic spiral that moves back and forth between the participant and the phenomenon of the lived experience.

I re-introduced the purpose of my study at the time of the interview and reviewed the consent form with each participant (see Appendix E). I sent a LED protocol via e-mail to be completed prior to the interview that served as a catalyst for possible pre-reflection about the lived experience of play (see Appendix D). After receiving the participants' electronic signatures and reviewing the consent form at the time of the interview, I used a digital recorder along with notes to gain access to the lived play experience of each participant. The interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes. Additionally, I had prepared what Smith, et al. (2009) call a loose interview agenda with open-ended questions designed to encourage a sense of autonomy, pre-reflective description, and personal interpretation (Smith, et al., 2009). My goal was to keep the phenomenological intent of the interview in mind, and listen for the unfolding of the essence of the descriptive lived moment. In order to capture the essence of a lived

experience, each participant had time and freedom to voice their stories in relation to the central phenomenon of play (Smith, et al., 2009).

After each interview, the digital recording was uploaded to a password-protected personal computer and saved to a flash drive. Handwritten notes and the flash drive were stored in a lock box in my home. Each audio recording was shared with and transcribed by a professional transcriptionist who had experience working with confidential data. In addition, a signed transcriber confidentiality form is found in Appendix F. Once each interview was transcribed, a copy of the interview was electronically sent to each participant to review for plausibility or validity through a qualitative process called member checks. Member checking is a process that requires me to ask one or more of the participants to check these data for accuracy or plausibility (Creswell, 2012). Van Manen (2014) argued that although most qualitative methodology uses language such as validation and member checking, it does not always carry the same meaning in phenomenology. Van Manen (2014) argued that validating the quality of the experiential accounts does not mean validation of the phenomenological study because validation of a phenomenological study must ask what the experience was like.

### **Data Analysis**

In order to gain insight to the essence of the lived play experiences by kindergarten teachers, data was analyzed through an iterative reflective hermeneutic process. The hermeneutic process allowed for me to move back and forth throughout these data on multiple occasions (Smith, et al., 2009). Insight and understanding was gained through guided existential inquiry (Vagle, 2014; van Manen, 2014). The process

of guided existential inquiry involved the investigation of universal themes often connected with human experiences. The overarching themes of relationality (self and others), corporeality (embodiment), spatiality (space), temporality (lived time), and materiality (things) guided my inquiry and analysis.

The first step that was taken was to listen to and read the audio-recorded interviews and transcripts holistically in order to grasp an understanding from different entry points. Participants lived descriptions remained the focus of my analysis. Smith et al. (2009) stressed that one important element in IPA is the movement between the part and the whole which is known as a hermeneutic (interpretative) cycle. To some degree the lived experiences and meanings of the participants in terms of the central phenomenon of play relied on the subjective analysis of me, the researcher, and it is important that I, also, enter the participant's world through the phenomenological thematic analysis and guided existential inquiry (Smith, et al., 2009; Vagle, 2014)).

The next steps included the whole- parts-whole hermeneutic spiral of reading that moves from reading the entire text to selecting parts of the text and reading line-by-line (Smith et al., 2009; Vagle, 2014). The phenomenological thematic analysis continued to spiral through a holistic, selective, and detailed reading process in order to gather and begin to interpret the described essence of a lived experience. According to Smith et al. (2009), the researcher will write detailed and comprehensive notes or comments about the data through close analysis. Close analysis allowed me to form a deeper engagement with the content, such as noticing the things that matter and things that have meaning to

the participant, combined with any noteworthy similarities, differences, or contradictions (Creswell, 2012; Smith et al., 2009).

Phenomenological data are analyzed using the hermeneutic spiral through an existential method of guided inquiry. Phenomenological analysis can only be conducted on pre-reflective experiential data and cannot be conducted on the perceptions or beliefs of the participants alone (van Manen: 2014). To gain more insight on the lived experience, I looked for any existential or universal themes that can often be connected to any human life (van Manen, 2014).

According to Smith et al. (2009), coding or thematizing involves compiling these data or lived experiences into themes in order to make sense of the text. The three types of semantic codes or comments include descriptive (explicit), linguistic (potential meaning of specific language), and conceptual (potential meaning nonspecific language) codes (Smith, et al., 2009). The last step in the analysis process was to develop emergent themes and to look for connections across the themes for all individual participants to find patterns across all of the participants. The iterative nature of IPA allows for reflexivity and flexibility within each individual case as well as among all cases (Smith et al., 2009).

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

To establish levels of creditability, dependability, and reflexivity throughout the research, the proposed study was be conducted by using Yardley's guidelines for qualitative research (Smith et al., 2009). Yardley's four principals for assessing quality research are sensitivity to context, commitment and rigor, transparency and coherence,

and impact and importance. *Sensitivity to context* will be ensured through observant review of the data and careful reflection of each individual participant's lived experiences by establishing a sense of trust and ease with the participants throughout the entire research process. To establish credibility, I included a form of member checking to ensure plausibility or credibility of the lived descriptions and insightful interpretation of the participants' life-world experiences. *Commitment to rigor* was maintained through in-depth analysis. The iterative nature of IPA contributes to thoroughness, transferability and dependability because I am committed to hermeneutic process and existential inquiry. *Transparency and coherence* was obtained through clearly written pre-reflective descriptions and reflective interpretations of the lived experience (Smith et al., 2009; Vagle, 2014; van Manen, 2014). The aim of phenomenological research is to focus on the existential meaning and not to gather empirical generalizations. Therefore, confirmability in terms of phenomenology looks at the depth of insight gained from the descriptions of the life-world (van Manen, 2014). While it is my intention to keep my personal and professional biases on the perimeter of this research, I acknowledge that my ultimate goal was to gain rich insight into the lived play experience of kindergarten teachers by being open and reflective throughout the phenomenological research process. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) stated that, "it's impossible to study something without having some effect on it" (p. 38) and ultimately this phenomenological study was intended to ensure a positive *impact and importance* in kindergarten pedagogy.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to gather descriptive evidence of the lived experiences by kindergarten teachers of the nature of play. An IPA was conducted to capture the pre-reflective descriptions of the individual participants lived play experience and to craft a reflective interpretation of the lived experience regarding curriculum planning and classroom arrangement. Five kindergarten teachers from a public school in northern New England participated in this study. These data were gathered through LED's, semi-structured interviews, and notes and analyzed through an iterative hermeneutic process of guided existential inquiry (Smith et al., 2009; van Manen, 2014). To establish credibility and trustworthiness, Yardley's four guidelines included sensitivity to context, commitment to rigor, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance. The intent of this research was to gather descriptions of the lived play experiences by kindergarten teachers in terms of how play influenced curriculum and classroom arrangement.

## Section 4: Findings and Analysis

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this IPA was to gather the lived experiences regarding the nature of play of five kindergarten teachers from northern New England through prereflective description and reflective interpretation in terms of how play manifests in curriculum planning and classroom arrangement. The overarching research question and two subquestions were:

RQ: What are the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers regarding the nature of play?

SRQ1: How do the lived play experiences of kindergarten teachers manifest in curriculum planning?

SRQ2: How do the lived play experiences of kindergarten teachers manifest in the arrangement of the classroom environment?

The following section provides the setting, demographics, data collection, thematic analysis, results, and final summary of the findings.

### **Settings**

A major point of consideration for the participants was that all experiences were respected in terms of understanding play irrespective of early childhood philosophy, school policy, or life stressors. In order to recruit participants for this study, superintendents from three different school districts in northern New England were contacted via e-mail and telephone. I received agreement from two of the three school



districts. Upon consent from the superintendent, kindergarten teachers from two school districts were contacted via e-mail, and there was interest from one school district. Originally six kindergarten teachers out of nine from a northern New England school district were interested participants. However, one teacher withdrew due to life circumstances and that left the minimum requirement of five. Therefore, five kindergarten teachers from four elementary schools participated in this study. Some conditions that may have influenced the participants' responses included the time of year, as the interviews took place within the last two months of school. Furthermore, the participants were in the process of preparing for a week with an additional hour of school per day in order to recapture time lost due to snow days, were in the process of end of the year assessments, which included district wide grant data reporting, and lastly, all participants were involved in screening for incoming kindergarten students. It appeared to be a busy time of year for the participants.

### **Demographics**

The participants in the study were five kindergarten teachers from a public school district in northern New England. All elementary schools within the district were represented in this study. Two participants worked at the same school and three participants worked at three different schools. All participants met the criteria of teaching kindergarten for a year or longer with a range of 3 to 22 years of kindergarten teaching experience. The kindergarten teachers were willing participants who valued play-based learning.

### **Data Collection**

Data was collected from each of the five participants in the form of written LEDs and audio-recorded interviews. The data was collected from each participant from April to June, 2016. A 60-minute interview was scheduled, and a reminder was sent via email the day prior to the interview to each participant. The LED, a formal writing protocol used to gather phenomenological data, was sent a week prior to the scheduled interview date to allow the participants ample time to write about a lived play experience. All five participants completed and returned the LED via e-mail. Each interview was conducted in the kindergarten classroom of the individual participant. Although the interviews were scheduled for a maximum of 60 minutes, the actual time ranged from 28 to 50 minutes. At the time of the interview, I reviewed the confidentiality form with each participant and conducted each interview using a digital audio recorder along with handwritten notes. After each interview, the data was transcribed in a timely manner by a transcriptionist who signed a confidentiality form. The transcripts were also transferred onto a thumb drive to support the hermeneutic data analysis process. Once the interview was transcribed, each participant received a copy of the transcripts via email to check for accuracy and plausibility. All five participants responded via e-mail with the words “ALL SET” in terms of the information being plausible and accurate with no additions or deletions to the data.

There were two variations from the original data collection plan. One variation was that three out of the five teachers sent the written LED after the interview due to time constraints, and the second variation was that five kindergarten teachers actually

participated in the research although the plan was to gather data from six kindergarten teachers. Nevertheless, IPA suggests a minimum of five participants, and the variations did not impact the integrity of the data collection. Last of all, the data collection procedure was conducted in a timely manner with no unusual circumstances present.

### **Data Analysis**

These data, analyzed through an iterative hermeneutic process, allowed me to complete the whole-parts-whole process by reading and rereading transcripts and listening and relistening to interviews. The hermeneutic process along with guided existential inquiry was helpful when reading each LED and interview transcript line by line. In order to gain more insight on the lived play experiences, I looked for the existential or universal themes connected with human experiences. The overarching themes of relationality (self and others), corporeality (embodiment), spatiality (space), temporality (lived time), and materiality (things) guided my inquiry and analysis.

The hermeneutic process combined with close analysis allowed for the spiraling of whole to parts to whole with a balance of verbatim excerpts, paraphrasing, and subjective interpretation (Vagle, 2014). The data analysis process also involved bracketing the verbatim excerpts combined with adding my interpretations and comments. I conducted a close analysis because it allowed for a deeper engagement with the content such as noticing the things that mattered and things that had meaning to each participant (Creswell, 2012; Smith et al., 2009). Each of the five participant's responses along with my comprehensive notes and comments were organized on five 30 x 23 inch wall-hanging-sized papers to look for codes and emerging themes.

According to Smith et al. (2009), the three types of semantic coding used in IPA research are descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual coding. *Descriptive* comments focus on the participants' explicit words, *linguistic* comments focus on the potential meaning of the participants' responses, and *conceptual* comments allow a researcher to consider potential meanings not explicitly mentioned by the participants. For the purpose of this research, I used different colored pencils to match each possible code. For example, all of the descriptive or explicit language was written in pencil, any linguistic or potential meaning of specific language was circled in red, and any conceptual, and nonspecific language was added in green. IPA research is designed to study the experience and to look at both individual and collective meanings through semantic coding.

The last step in the analysis process was to develop emergent themes as I looked to capture the meaning and insight from each of the five participants. Phenomenology is a qualitative method that does not seek to find empirical generalizations, but looks to capture and craft the meaning and essence of a shared phenomenon that for the purpose of this study was play (Smith et al., 2009; Vagle, 2014). Thus, three overall themes emerged through descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments shared by the participants. The overall themes that emerged from the hermeneutic analytical process were: community building, creative learning, and engaged excitement. In terms of community building, Teacher 1 said, "There is a lot of community energy when they are playing out there, and they are so involved in that play," and Teacher 2 concurred, "It's never one child building something. They tend to cluster together and make a creation

together.” The participants shared how play becomes a natural venue for cooperative learning and team building that starts with a creative and imaginative idea.

The second theme that emerged from the study was creative learning. Teacher 3 stated, “What they want is a table filled with pencils, crayons, scissors, or anything that they can create with. That’s the one they love the most . . . [the] creation station.” Similarly, Teacher 2 mentioned, “I always say just give the kids time and some materials or maybe not even materials, and they will come up the best ideas. They’re so creative!” It appeared that all participants noticed that children instinctively and happily applied classroom concepts in ways beyond the curriculum expectations.

A third theme that developed was engaged excitement. Teacher 4 stated, “It’s excitement! That’s when I get to see the light bulb go on and see how kids have taken concepts and ideas and put them together.” Likewise, Teacher 5 mentioned, “The last part of the day [choice/play time] is what they really look forward to, and I find that time of day to be the most relaxed part of the day every day. . . It is a high interest time.” As participants shared the lived play experience as they lived through it, I noticed a personal level of excitement emerged in terms of body movement, intonation, word choice, laughter, and what appeared to be lightheartedness.

The overall themes of community building, creative learning, and engaged excitement that emerged from this study demonstrated that play experiences allowed children to collaborate, problem solve, imagine, physically move, and build excitement for learning naturally. Furthermore, these play experiences also allowed an opportunity for the participants to understand how young children approached learning. All

participants in this study valued play and instinctively knew that play was important for young children in terms of whole child learning. However, the elements of time and academic pressure seemed to have a propensity to dampen the expansion of the play experience due to pending curriculum expectations and district outcomes.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

In order to maintain levels of creditability, dependability, and reflexivity throughout the study, I implemented Yardley's guidelines for qualitative research (Smith et al., 2009). Yardley's four principals for assessing quality research that applied to this study are sensitivity to context, commitment and rigor, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance. *Sensitivity to context* was ensured through the hermeneutic process applied to the data and careful reflection of each individual participant's lived experiences in that I established a sense of trust and ease with the participants throughout the entire research process. I assured the participants that their experiences mattered, that all information gained remained confidential, and that a summary of the results would be shared with all participants as well as the superintendent. In order to establish credibility, I included a form of member checking to ensure plausibility or credibility of the lived play experience descriptions, as each participant had an opportunity to review the transcripts and make changes if needed. All five participants responded with the words "ALL SET" after reviewing the transcripts, and none of the participants changed or added to the data. *Commitment to rigor* was maintained through in-depth analysis. The iterative nature of IPA contributes to thoroughness, transferability, and dependability, and I was

committed to hermeneutic process and existential inquiry. I spent many days listening and reading and rereading the whole transcript, and then I took it apart line by line. *Transparency and coherence* was obtained through prereflective descriptions and reflective interpretations of the lived experience as each participant had an opportunity to prereflectively write and talk about the lived play experience. Additionally, throughout the interview process each participant had the opportunity to reflectively interpret how play manifests through the curriculum and classroom arrangement. Lastly, *impact and importance* was confirmed through the depth of insight gained from the descriptions and interpretations of the lived-world experience by being open and reflective throughout the entire research process.

### **Results**

The growing gap in kindergarten pedagogy between the science of child development and early learning with teaching beliefs and practices has contributed to a lack of understanding of teachers lived play experiences (Miller & Almon, 2009; Ranz-Smith, 2012; Russell, 2011; Sherwood & Reifel, 2010). The purpose of this study was to gather the lived experiences of the nature of play by five kindergarten teachers from northern New England through pre-reflective description and reflective interpretation in terms of how play manifests in curriculum planning and classroom arrangement.

The overall themes that emerged from the hermeneutic analytical process were *Community Building*, *Creative Learning*, and *Engaged Excitement*. These themes are addressed throughout this section and are organized within the research question and two sub questions:

RQ: What are the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers regarding the nature of play?

SRQ1: How do the lived play experiences by kindergarten teachers manifest in curriculum planning?

SRQ2: How do the lived play experiences by kindergarten teachers manifest in the arrangement of the classroom environment?

### **The Lived Play Experiences of Kindergarten Teachers**

The overarching question for this study—What are the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers regarding the nature of play?—was explored through written LEDs and semistructured interviews. Four teachers wrote and talked about the same play experiences while one participant wrote and talked about two different play experiences. As the interview process continued, most of the participants' descriptions unfolded into more than one play experience. All five participants had a daily scheduled choice time [play] while one participant had choice time twice a day. Overall the time frame for play varied from teacher to teacher with times ranging anywhere between 25 minutes to 45 minutes a day. Additionally all participants had set this time in the classroom to be a self-directed experience explicitly designed for play choices. Teacher 4 mentioned that she called playtime “learning centers” and said

It is a time for kids to socialize, learn social skills, um increase vocabulary and experience things they haven't before. Our dramatic play area is dress up and right now we're doing food groups so all of our plastic foods have been divided into the five food groups and at the end of play, they put food back into the food



groups so they know how to put things away and are learning the basic food groups too. I have big blocks for the balance and engineering and all those other core things that help them cooperate and how to work together or do side by side play which is what a couple of my kids are still doing. Just whatever activities I can think of and find to do that are going to increase their fine-motor /gross motor skills as well as social skills and vocabulary building.

The materials available during Choice Time varied from classroom to classroom. Yet it seemed that children had access to most of the supplies in the classroom. Some of the supplies consisted of colored shapes, dinosaurs, bears, and other animals of various sizes, creative art materials, play dough, wooden blocks, magnetic shapes, Legos, tinker table, books, cd players, easels, and a kitchen area. Two classrooms had a permanent kitchen/house keeping area, one classroom shared the kitchen with another teacher, one classroom had a traveling housekeeping area that was brought into the classroom during Choice Time, and one classroom did not have a dramatic play or housekeeping area at all. Play also appeared to be integrated into daily lessons in all five participants classrooms during the more formal teacher-directed lessons in literacy and math.

When asked to describe a memorable play experience in the form of a written LED and interviews, participants' descriptions of the play experience showed evidence of the emergent themes of *community building*, *creative learning*, and *engaged excitement*. The descriptions demonstrated that children work together to apply daily concepts, rehearse routines, learn through creative imagination, solve problems, and build

relationships during the play experience. Teacher 2, who has taught kindergarten for over 10 years, wrote

I looked over and 2 little girls were dressed up and ready for a day of traveling and shopping complete with gaudy jewelry and rolling luggage. Then I looked over at 3 kiddos playing in the circle area. One was obviously the teacher, pointer in hand and reading through the week's song/poem written on chart paper on the easel. She corrected the 'students' if they misread a word. I heard 'my language, my voice,' come out of hers. I just love that! Next she had another student be the calendar kid, a coveted weekly job in the class. That student ran through our morning routine from calendar to weather and temp check. They counted how many days to AJ's birthday. They counted out how many more days until book buddy day. I had a chance to see what is important to them. . . As I watch them play, I am aware of how well they can talk about the class rules, not always, 'follow' the rules, but can certainly remind their classmates of them in play. [Smile]. . . I realize so much happens in 15 minutes. The kiddos make me smile every day. They wow me with their creativity and ideas. I am not saying it's all wonderful all the time, but if we let them be kids, we will all experience more joy and learning everyday.

Similarly, Teacher 5, a kindergarten teacher of more than five years, described the lived play experience using the words excitement, social learning, and free of behavior problems.

The clock had just struck 2:00 on a May afternoon. My kindergarten students have been learning about time all week, so I prompted them to notice what time the clock said. Several students at once answered 2:00 and immediately stopped what they were doing for math and begin asking about different play items that they could take out. . . I then looked around the room and noticed two boys and a girl were using my big wooden blocks to build a bear garage for my counting bears. They talked excitedly about different things to do and add onto the garage, but arguing was very minimal. . . Another group using the magna formers became so loud and the students became so animated that I did have to call them over to quiet them. . . There is no naughty or malicious behavior here, they had just dramatized the game to such a high level that their energy was so high and they were excited. I always struggle with stopping them because I want them the room to be quiet and controlled but it also seems to be a very fruitful social learning time for them.

Teacher 3 agreed that the noise level during Choice Time is often loud and admits, “ I have to watch myself because as I’ve gotten older in my teaching, loud is harder for me, so I really work at letting them be loud when they need to.” Teacher 2 did not mention the noise level, yet shared how children communicate or socialize during play and stated,

The language that they used is really cool and they listen to each other and I guess that is what I really saw was that they were talking and listening to each other and they were doing what each other asked in the pretending part of the play.

Likewise, Teacher 1 agreed that children seemed to talk and listen to each other.

It's very voluntary. "I'll do this and you'll do that." There have been few (social) issues around resolving around who gets to drive the fire truck or whatever, but not to the point where it interfered, or sent kids away discouraged. There is definitely a teamwork attitude around it [play].

Teacher 4 who has taught kindergarten less than 10 years agreed that the noise level "is a little louder but it is a controlled environment. . . . You will hear them try to figure out how to describe what they are doing." Teacher 4 continued to describe how during math time play is encouraged through exploration before introducing any math concepts.

One of my favorites is um, with math materials. I have a play experience with all of our math materials and I had a student who was um, exploring numbers and more advanced concepts and I found it difficult to challenge her, but she was good at challenging herself and she started building towers one day with unifix cubes and just build all the way across the floor cause she couldn't get them to stand up and laid them down and then went end to end. I asked her how many she had and she said, "I don't know," and I said, "how could you figure it out?" She grouped them all into tens, pulled them apart and figured out how many tens she had and she had 20 sets of tens and six left over and then was able to figure out how to write 206 on her own. And after that we went to hundreds with her but just through her own exploration with putting towers together.

As Teacher 4 reflectively interpreted the play experience, she stated,

So it's taught me that when kids build towers, they aren't just building towers, they're learning important math concepts. . . . Others watched her and then talked

to her about what she is doing and we called others over to see what she had done . . . and others did the same play activity, later on, in other days.

Teacher 4 continued to describe the feeling that she had during play experiences.

Its' excitement because that is when I get to see light bulbs go on and see how kids have taken concepts and ideas and put them together and integrate them into what they can do. You see things click.

In this instance Teacher 4 seemed to use play as a precursor to introducing a math concept in order to observe how children interacted with the materials. Although she had a lesson in mind, she waited to see what the children did with the materials first. Unlike Teacher 4, Teacher 1 who has taught kindergarten for less than 5 years described the lived play experience as a chance to distract children from arguing and to role model social skills through imagination.

You know, it was fun and I think it was great for kids to see, I mean I had a great time doing it [playing] and I think that they could see that I was enjoying that with them. We could all go to this place that was entirely in our imaginations and have fun together. I think it was good for them [children] to see an adult not just as an authoritative figure but as somebody that could just get down and you know do it [play] with them. We just laughed and we were silly and it's very humanizing.

Teacher 3 agreed that being part of the play experience is fun and stated,

How lucky for me. I have the best job. I get to laugh and be part of a lighthearted moment. I mean we laugh a lot in our day. . . So being part of the playful experience, keeps me young and keeps me in shape. I think that is why I stay in

kindergarten. They're just fun little people to be with. Five and six year olds are fun!

It appeared that although the participants described play experiences were different in terms of content, all participants shared a common felt sense of fun, excitement, and lightheartedness that seemed to contribute to the emergence of three themes of community building, creative learning, and engaged excitement.

Teacher 1's lived play experience showed evidence of the integration of *community building, creative learning, and engaged excitement*.

On this particular day, students played in small groups around the playground.

One student who had few opportunities for peer interaction and socialization prior to coming to kindergarten was once again at the center of an issue that had erupted with two classmates on the fire truck. I made my way to the fire truck to see if I could facilitate a resolution and found that the conflict revolved around play partnerships and bossiness and exclusion (standard kindergarten fare). As the three of us sat on the fire truck and talked through the problem, I asked the children if they had ever ridden on a fire truck. All three said that they hadn't, and so I asked them the simple question, "Would you like to fight some fires today?" Their faces expressed skepticism and confusion, and so I hopped up, charged to the "steering wheel," and shouted that the call had come in that the store was on fire and they needed our help. I asked each child to take a responsibility (hoses, steering the back of the engine, manning the siren) so we could get there quickly. I exaggerated the effects of a tight turn, hanging onto the bars and swinging my

body outward, which elicited giggles from the children, erasing their inhibitions about participating, and igniting their interest in the game. Before long they were shouting orders (“We’re there,” “Bring the hoses closer,” “Squirt the water on the fire,” etc.), vocalizing a siren and radio calls, and pretending to uncoil and squirt water from the hose. Once the fire was out, the students looked at me as if to ask, “Now what?” I pulled out my imaginary radio, and said that there had been another call for a fire truck at the McGoy’s barn, and we needed to help rescue the animals. The kids raced back to the fire truck at the top of the hill, taking over the driving, the hoses, the siren, and the direction of the play.

Teacher 1 continued to reflect and interpret the lived play experience

At this point, I took myself out of the play and watched from a distance. I noticed that a few other children, who had been watching the first fire event, joined them and were quickly incorporated into the play, given or assumed different responsibilities as they raced to the next fire. This time the students disembarked in the other direction, sprinting across the hilltop to the set of swings that they had designated as the McGoy’s barn. One student shouted that they would go into the barn to rescue the horses, which inspired others to choose other animals that they would rescue from the burning barn. After all of the animals were out of the burning barn, students ran back to the fire truck to go to their next fire. At this point, there were about a dozen children squeezed onto the fire truck participating in the game. This play continued for the remainder of the recess, students racing to different parts of the playground to put out fires; and variations on this game

continued on subsequent days with different combinations of children. Although there was a lull in this play when snow and ice covered this part of our playground, the game has resumed with the return of warmer weather.

Once I had modeled for them one way to utilize that equipment, students were able to use that equipment in a variety of ways, applying their own interests, storylines, and scenarios (for example, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle rescue vehicle and the bus to the hockey game). This kind of play also allowed my students to socially organize themselves around a common goal (putting out fires and fighting bad guys) They assigned themselves specific duties or jobs to this end and the space and format of the game gave them opportunities to resolve conflicts within the game (e.g. taking turns to drive the fire truck). I also think an important aspect of this play experience was that the equipment and the physical space around it allowed kids to move and participate in the ways they each needed to (rolling down the hill, sprinting, jumping off, climbing onto, and swinging on the equipment, verbally organizing peers, etc.).

Teacher 1 proceeded to share another play experience within seconds and said

Oh, and one of the coolest things that happened one day was when we had a stretch of inside recess and somebody built a huge castle or a fortress with all the blocks, a couple of boys built that and then some little girls were playing with our animals and brought all the animals over and they said, “We’re going to attack your fortress.” So they had them all lined up and then we had these little play mobile guys and then somebody else brought . . . and it’s sort of like this whole



microcosm of the universe, all these beings, sort of going in towards this fortress, and we basically had every toy off the shelf, all focused on this one fortress . . . which was really cool because I think almost every child was part of that and so that was a very long choice time, but it was good and a fun experience.

Teacher 1 mentioned that the spontaneous development of the ‘microcosm of the universe’ was fun because “they were sort of building off each other’s ideas.” This play along with the experience of Teacher 3 showed evidence of the melding of *community building*, *creative learning*, and *engaged excitement* for teachers as well as students.

Teacher 3 has taught kindergarten for over 15 years and described different excerpts of memorable play experiences through a more reflective lens that demonstrated how excitement builds community and how learning can happen within playful interactions for both the teacher and the children. Teacher 3 happily stated, “I’m just playful anyway. I think that is what kindergarteners teach. . . I think that really sets forth the tone of the classroom in that it is a playful place.” She continued to describe how the set up of dramatic play is one of her happiest play experiences.

Dramatic play was the most special area where we created bakeries, garages, banks, jewelry stores. . . We had such fun creating those areas and part of the reason we had fun with it is that I think we just liked playing in the area [laughs]. So we would get totally into it, we’d sit there at the end of the day till 5 o’clock Creating this area, but the part of that was because I think we were actually playing ourselves-thru the experience- so particular areas brought the most important learning moments for our students. So my favorite memory of teaching

kindergarten is dramatic play- the set up of it and watching the kids in action. But you do not see a dramatic play in my room now though, do you?

Teacher 3 described a memorable play experience during the interview that revolved around her favorite play experience that she no longer does due to what she said is a “time factor.” Teacher 3 continued,

We have to participate in this grant and I have spent more time documenting myself doing, you know, activities and filling out paper work to show evidence and downloading it onto my computer, you know testing kids so that I can show that I have meet certain academic goals and that is where my time goes. That is what is making this job feel and look differently than it should. . . It doesn't feel good right in here [points to her heart]. . . I don't have the time it takes to create dramatic play anymore and I have replaced it with a literacy activities. I try to make them as playful as possible like these old phones. What the kids have to do is sit back to back with a friend, and they have to go, “Bling, bling, hi, do you have a sight word for me?” So their friend will go, “Yes, would you write the word am?” So they have to write it on a piece of paper. They love these props and they can't wait to get to the center. I'm not teaching kindergarten anymore. I'm teaching first grade therefore I really have to kind of come up with creative ways to get play in the classroom. We do have choice time at the end of the day that is explicitly for playing in the classroom.

Teacher 3 seemed to yearn for more time to prepare the kindergarten classroom and seemed to miss the element of dramatic play that once brought her happiness.

Additionally, Teacher 3 also noticed how pretend play reflects more character play that is unknown to her and stated

It is interesting how play has changed and I think that with the change of technology they [children] will play-act video games or characters. I don't know who these characters are but that's not something that I remember from when I was teaching long ago. It was more authentic play-acting you know like the person at the grocery store and now it is more character driven through video games and that is a definite shift over the years.

The described lived play experiences of the five participants showed evidence of an integrative approach to living and learning. It appeared from the descriptions gathered that engaged and excited children and teachers build relationships through imaginative and creative play experiences. Additionally, the pre-reflections and interpretations of the shared phenomenon of play had awoken different emotions for the participants in terms of nostalgia, excitement, sadness, and pressure. For instance, Teacher 3, a veteran kindergarten teacher of over 18 years reflected how she used to enjoy the preparation and excitement of the play experience but due to academic pressure, lack of prep time and the changes in children's play, a conflicting feeling arises within. Additionally, Teacher 5 who has taught for over 5 years mentioned that she felt sad that kindergarten has become more academic. Nevertheless, all participants seemed to experience play in different ways throughout the day and some of those experiences expand into the area of curriculum.

### **How Does the Play Experience Manifest in the Curriculum?**

The previous pages contained an account of how participants in the study described the play experience as they lived through it. As I gathered the five different stories about the same phenomenon of play three themes emerged: *community building*, *creative learning*, and *engaged enthusasim*. Some of the words the participants used to describe the play experience were free, high interest, colloborative, creative, happy, love, cool, voluntary, choice, learning, structured, fun, excited, loud, messy, imaginative, and phenomenal. The lived experiences of the participants naturally evloved into the what is considered curriculum such as math, literacy, social studies, and science. It appeared that all of the participants implemented play-based learning activities throughout the curriculum with a mixed feeling of pressure to do more academics. For example, Teacher 5 said,

It's a double-edged sword. At times it feels great like why don't I do this [play] more and why don't I just relax and step back and let them move around. . . They have choice, they get to pick who they're working with and so taking that pressure off immediately moves them into a good place. . . I feel like all I know is super super academic driven- we've got to move kids, they've got to move levels. I feel a sort of sadness. I want them to have a release and grow socially through play and I don't want it to be all paper/pencil so I try to incorporate more play in my morning centers, you know building words with play dough, having it be super, super sensory, and letting them clip words and just use their hands to move.

I am certainly very demanding of them during this time. . . I also feel that pullback of am I pushing them to hard during the day?

Similarly Teacher 2 agreed and stated,

I feel pressure that I am not getting everything that I need to get in academically. . . I get pressure, but then, you know, you do what you think is right so you always got that struggle... I am lucky that I do not have an administrator that says you can't have play twice a day. . . That's [during play] where we learn so much about them . . . and what I really see is that they were talking and listening to each other . . . they're taking that one step further with each other.

Teacher 4 concurred,

I would say the expectation for academics, I feel, has inhibited people from doing play and I've just intergrated more of my academics into play. For example, we do writing when we write menus; we do writing when we write down what people want to eat. We do reading when we go to the library and sign out a book from the classroom and they have to find the title on the book and write it on an index card and they share their reading with other people in their group. I mean I try to pull something into all of it.

When asked how the play experience influenced instruction Teacher 4 responded,

“It really guides my instruction. It tells me what students are ready for next and it tells me when they're having misconceptions, and it tells me how they are working with other people, and which concepts or words they understand and which ones they don't.”

Similarly, Teacher 5 shared how she learned about her students through play:

I have found out their interests more through play than through just natural conversation . . . in the beginning of the year I had a little guy who would pull out dinosaurs every day and I was able to get some books on dinosaurs and get some more non-fiction, like high interest things for him. . . It helps me to see their personalities more, the kids that are really kind of bold, take over, personalities and the kids that are just quiet bumble bees. . . . It helps me to make [academic] choices that match their interests and I can plan around their interests.

Teacher 2 mentioned the complex cognitive thinking that was seen during Choice Time.

I had a little guy one time that made a standing mailbox out of paper and he had like the door, I mean the little door [laughs] and one little guy one year made the ball drop, the new years' ball drop so we hung it from the ceiling and did go up and down, you know, paper and tape [laughs] and staples, tons of staples. . . . I try to insert that there is math and science involved and that the mailbox is all engineering and science and building and thinking. Gosh, the thinking that went into that! I try to keep everything connected! We have a writing program now that doesn't always feel connected so I am always trying to connect it. We have been doing woodworking so my literacy centers or my activities that I do with them have to do with building and I put words on the blocks and they build sentences by putting the blocks together. They get really excited!

Teacher 1 suggested that play encourages interaction with curriculum content in terms of role-playing and movement.

One of the things we do to connect play to the curriculum is role-playing and I try to have more active learning, the kids' love that you know. . . Rather than just reading a book, we act it out. We act out the life cycle of a frog to apply what we learned. . . Also, I think another important part of the planning is also letting them lead the way too.

Teacher 2 responded with an experience of how play was extended and implemented into the curriculum in creative ways,

They get really excited! We did the book Five Little Ducks and we acted out the song by going outside to play and we acted it out almost every single day and it was about subtraction and they do it during their play time and then we do a sink and float activity and create a vessel and they like to do these activities again and again.

Teacher 3 agreed with the importance of creating playful ways to learn different mathematical concepts such as subtraction.

I got to get them to understand subtraction which is crazy cause developmentally it's not an easy concept but I'm going to do it as playfully as I can and in a way that engages them and helps them to make sense of it. So therefore I pull out the frogs and pull out the life cycle books and activities that are all driven from a frog theme and again, this doesn't end up being a choice for them.

Teacher 4 stated how listening to children's play ideas supported the integration of literacy and math as she shared this experience.

Children were dismissed from snack tables to go to Learning Stations (dramatic play, math exploration, library, big blocks, table blocks, Legos™, painting, sand/water table, Playdoh™, sculpture station, building station, etc.). One group went to the “kitchen.” Most times students played house or did some cooking. The plastic food is organized into food groups so that students learn as they put things away at cleanup time. On this day I overheard two students trying to figure out how to have a restaurant. “We need those little books they write in.” “We need trays, too.” They turned toward me and walked over to ask if I had anything they could use. I dug out tiny notepads and an old cafeteria tray. As they played they talked about going out to eat, how to write the words for foods, and how. When we regrouped they shared how they played. Students created a list of three or four foods for each food group that I made into a menu with pictures and words. Parents donated aprons, packaging from foods, straws, and play money. We added a pitcher and paper cups. Students served real water. They figured out that we needed ‘customers.’ After problem solving, we agreed that students from the library station could bring books to the restaurant (The Kin-der Cafe’). The idea kept expanding. They played restaurant for weeks! Students read books about food, wrote checks for the “chef”, talked about what to choose from food groups as they ordered, paid with money, and learned about social etiquette for a restaurant.

These lived play descriptions showed evidence of the melding of the three themes of *community building, creative learning* and *engaged excitement* within the content of



the curriculum. All participants playfully introduced academic content, but not all participants allowed the play of young children to direct to flow of the curriculum primarily because of an internal push and pull to ‘get academics in’ and not knowing how to balance the curriculum expectations with the play ideas of young children. Although play naturally leads to academics and classroom arrangement, there appeared to be hesitation from three participants as to how to sustain the play of young children beyond choice time whereas, two of the participants found a more natural route to integrate play into academic time. The final question in the study was how does the lived play experiences manifest in the arrangement of the classroom environment.

### **How Does the Play Experience Manifest in the Arrangement of the Classroom?**

The following pages demonstrate how the experience of play manifested in the arrangement of the classroom environment. This question showed evidence of discrepancy in the responses of the participants due to space issues, academic pressure, and time. Teacher 4 demonstrated how play manifests in the classroom the emerging themes of *community building*, *creative learning*, and *engaged excitement*.

It [play] helps me think about what books that I might want to bring into the classroom and it might also lead to new stations. Kitchen area turned into a restaurant and what we did is we connected it to the math stations. We moved the shelf so that we had a kitchen area for the day and the kids that were in the library would go get a book and then go to the restaurant and read and order. And we put play money in there and they were pretending to pay for the meals. In the past I actually brought in bales of hay and did things like that during a farm unit because

I had kids that had never been to a farm. The sensory experience of hay is a huge part of a farm and it was very sensory and fun for them. We talked about the animals, watched a video and we were able to visit a farm, too.

Similarly Teacher 2 responded how play experiences influence the way she sets up her classroom and how space can become a problem in terms of how she would like to arrange the classroom.

It is tricky. I have to rearrange and I don't rearrange the class too often but sometimes I do. When I bring in the wood working stuff, I have a tool bench and other stuff. So I have to do some reconfiguring. I may switch some tables around to fit those things. Every once in a while the kids will get excited! I switch them around where they sit cause I want them to mingle with other people but I try to keep the basic set up of the class the same. I keep my circle area pretty much set cause I want that to be the same all the time. My libraries are always there, but they [children] pretty much bring all their play out except for the housekeeping area but they bring it everywhere- not enough room. I wish I had one of those big class rooms that did have a block area but now they have to take blocks off the shelf and they find a place, usually on the carpet, but that's what they know and so that's what they do.

While it is the case that Teacher 2 and Teacher 4 shared similar experiences in terms of how play easily can impact the arrangement of the classroom, Teacher 3 had a different experience.

My area for morning meeting and my block area are very sacred to me so

I don't change that. However, I will change this area here (a shelf with boxes). My literacy and math boxes are there, those change but they still look the same over there. I change what is inside the boxes bi weekly. . . The tables might change but in regard to facilitating it for play it doesn't change like it use to for me. It doesn't change like the kids will come in and it will be a whole different fantastic grocery store, you know. If you walked into my pre-k you would see a flower shop in there now and that's driven through her dramatic play and ah, that's what K used to feel like. I feel like I am teaching first grade and I struggle with that and I get a little teary eyed about . . . I try not to think about it, but there would be less pressure if I could create a room in a way that could support play more often than putting [academic] pressure on kids.

Likewise Teacher 2 mentioned that the classroom arrangement is not geared for play because academics is the major focus.

That is challenging. We get choice time/free play every day but as you can see if you look around this classroom, does it look like I have toys here? [Toys are on shelves in boxes/containers- tucked away]. I don't have a sand table. It is pretty devoid of playthings and I think it's because the focus is so academic. I do have a kitchen behind there. I could turn the kitchen around but I could tell you it will be a visual distraction during writing time. I do wonder about creating some more spaces here that are not specifically designed for you know sitting at a table and maybe they are space under tables or little cubbies, maybe a big box. . . The kitchen will be gone next week because we share it and we each get it for a

trimester but the physical space will still be there. . . Maybe I could pose a question to the kids and ask what should we do with the space now that the kitchen is gone? The kids will be excited about this. . . We can do a shared writing activity. . . Also, I think I would like to bring learning outside more often because there is more space outside. . . So many kids don't have a lot of physical space in the classroom to move.

Teacher 5 had a similar experience to Teacher 1 and Teacher 3 and stated,

I think its tough. My first year that I started here we were not as academic as we are now, so I had a kitchen in my classroom, I had a reading area with a little lamp and they had bean bags and it just was a lot more center friendly if that makes sense. I still have a kitchen that doesn't really fit in my room anymore because we are so academic but I pull that in during playtime and they play restaurant- they play kitchen. I feel like now I have to have my reading table there [points to table]. I don't have space for some toys that they might crave or they might like. I do have my Lego table, and I'll pull it out, flip it over, and put the train side one and that will just completely change it for some of my boys but I don't do that every day. . . What is interesting is that I recently got four new computers in my room that take up space and I have kids who never ever choose to do computer and every single Choice Time that kind of sticks out to me. I find this setting and this smaller space hard to incorporate all of the academic demands that we have but also to let them move and play. My principal is big on experience and we are doing a Fairy Tale Day and we're going to have a Camp

out Day where we bring in a tent and read books about camping and the kids roast marshmallows. The centers are all play and I've done this for three years and they are happy as clams!

The participants' responses in terms of how the play experience can manifest or influence arrangement of the classroom environment demonstrated that for some teachers play may naturally influence how the classroom is set up and for others it may appear to be more challenging in terms of space, time, and academic expectations. The emerging themes of *community building*, *creative learning*, and *engaged excitement* appeared to be more noticeable throughout two participants' experiences. Although it seemed more challenging for the other three participants, it did appear that there were moments in time when play had influenced the arrangement of the classroom environment.

### Summary

Five kindergarten teachers' descriptive lived play experiences were gathered and interpreted for the purposes of this research. All participants valued play-based learning and scheduled a Play/Choice Time daily. The findings in this study showed evidence how play naturally and simultaneously encouraged the development of social relationships and academic skills. The themes that emerged from this study such as *community building*, *creative learning*, and *engaged excitement* are in essence skills required to navigate life. The importance of *community building* is affirmed by Teacher 5 who said, "the sharing, the working together, all of those skills carry up with them through high school. . . the collaboration piece is huge." Teacher 3 reiterated that "play is a great time to kind of hash through stuff because it is quickly resolved." In this study it appeared that the lived play

experiences of kindergarten teachers offered insight to the importance of building relationships and solving problems when people are young children because such skills are necessary elements of a conscientious society.

The participants affirmed the concept that free play offered opportunities for creative and imaginative learning. For example, Teacher 4 mentioned, “I’ve got kids that are now experimenting with how to change games and adapt games. . . Students are now showing us new ways to play math games.” All participants in this study allowed students the freedom to choose activities, toys, or materials that interested children during the Choice Time and although the noise level in the environment can tend to be higher, the participants have accepted that noise can mean that *creative learning* was taking place.

Finally, the last theme that emerged from the data was *engaged excitement*. Not only did the participants have an opportunity to share moments of children who demonstrate engaged excitement, but they also modeled what engaged excitement looks like to their students as Teacher 3 said, “They know I love them and that I am here as their support and champion, but part of that is cause we laugh together, we play together, and have fun.” Teacher 5 mentioned how “playtime really captures them . . . I want children to still think learning is fun through play because this is where learning starts. It all starts here.” Not only did the participants seem to capture the excitement of children but they also captured their own passion and enthusiasm about the potentiality of play in the kindergarten environment.

## Section 5: Discussion, Recommendations, and Implications for Social Change

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this IPA was to gather the lived experiences of the nature of play of five kindergarten teachers from northern New England through prereflective description and reflective interpretation of how play manifests in curriculum planning and classroom arrangement. Due to an increased emphasis on teacher-directed instruction and academic preparedness, there seems to be a growing gap between the science of child development and early learning and teachers' beliefs and instructional practices (Fleer, 2009; LaRue & Kelly, 2015; Miller & Almon, 2009; Moon & Reifel, 2008; Russell, 2011; Sherwood & Reifel, 2010). The purpose of this study was to investigate how teachers experienced and made sense of play in the kindergarten environment. The descriptive play experiences and reflective interpretations of kindergarten teachers are underrepresented in play literature, and these data are valuable because how teachers make sense of play is most likely reflected in their educational practice (Larsson, 2013; Sherwood & Reifel, 2010). Knowledge of the essence of kindergarten teachers' lived play experiences has potential for social change in terms of professional development, academic expectations, and the arrangement of the classroom.

If early childhood educators shared knowledge of the complexities and the advantages of play in the kindergarten classroom, positive change in terms of balanced kindergarten pedagogy can occur. A teacher's role in the play experience sets the foundation for appropriate and balanced educational experiences. The findings from this

study can serve as a catalyst for change in the kindergarten setting because play-based learning naturally awakens the forming of community, initiates the invention of creative learning opportunities, and propels excitement for engagement in real life. The following section includes interpretation and discussion, limitations, recommendations, implications for positive social change, and conclusion.

### **Interpretation and Discussion**

The purpose of an IPA is to craft a deeper insight into a particular phenomenon rather than collect empirical generalizations (Vagle, 2014). The insight gathered from the descriptive experiences and interpretations in this study demonstrated that kindergarten play is a foundational path towards lifetime learning and skill building. Play is considered to be an essential element in early childhood pedagogy primarily because play is the most natural and meaningful way that children build relationships, learn different concepts, construct knowledge, regulate self, and deepen their connection to the world (Brown, 2009; Copple & Bredekamp, 2012, de Souza, 2012; Hyson, 2009; Johnson, Eberle, Henricks, & Kuschner, 2014; Jones & Reynolds, 2012; Miller & Almon, 2009; Sutton-Smith, 1997; Wohlend & Pepler, 2015). Although there are over 300 kinds of play, the most common types of play shared by the participants in this study were categorized as constructive, pretend, and physical play (LaRue & Kelly, 2015; Meckley, 2015; Nilsen, 2010; Sluss, 2015). According to Frost et al. (2012), in constructive play, children move from manipulating objects to using the imagination to create, build, experiment, and build new ideas. The lived experiences described in this study demonstrated a high level of constructive play melded within dramatic or pretend play.



Dramatic play is most often associated with pretend and make-believe play and this type of play has the potential to influence social skills, problem solving, emotional development, or oral and receptive language skills (Singer, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2013). All participants shared the benefits of play in terms of language and vocabulary development. Moreover, the findings suggested that pretend play creates a space for cooperative learning through problem solving and prosocial skill development. Although not all participants in this study had a designated space for dramatic play, often referred to by the participants as “the kitchen.” Children still participated in a variety of pretend play experiences such as retelling a favorite story, acting out different scenarios in and out of the classroom, or pretending to be the teacher.

The constructive and pretend play experiences shared by the participants demonstrated that the integration or melding of the following themes of community building, creative learning, and engaged excitement were present. Throughout either the LED or interview, participants in this study shared how choice time was the best place for children to develop social skills through the entire year and how social skill development was most obvious during choice time [play] or during a recess play. According to Parten (1933), there are six categories of social participation that present themselves in play. Consequently, all participants demonstrated how play naturally evolved into the development of prosocial skills as children’s participation deepened in profound ways. One participant shared how the changes in social development are a “huge deal” and felt a big sense of accomplishment, but it was a “hidden sense of accomplishment like nobody else will ever see that.” Relationship building, cooperative learning, problem

solving, and, as one participant expressed, the creation of the “microcosm of the universe” took place during choice time.

An additional finding was how some teachers used the experience of choice time to extend or expand upon the interests of the children where the children’s play ideas were woven into the curriculum during writing or math, for example. Playful experiences allow teachers to gain insight about children’s present moment learning, and teachers in this study used the play of young children to integrate subject matter, teach social skills, support emotional development, or extend concepts (Larsson, 2013). All participants described moments of imaginative learning that created a synergy of application, rehearsing, experimenting, love, happiness, and imagining beyond the boundaries of the curriculum. Although only two participants transferred children’s choice time interests into curriculum planning, all participants in this study used playful multisensory activities to support academic expectations. In addition, two participants described how the play of young children helped guide their instruction and four participants mentioned how the play experience helped them to know the children better in terms of how children approach learning, if there are misconceptions, or finding out personal or group interests.

These findings connect to the plethora of early childhood research that states young children learn best when engaged in some form of playful learning experiences and it is within the context of play where the spark for academia takes root (Fleer, 2009; LaRue & Kelly, 2015; Leong & Bodrova, 2012; Miller & Almon, 2009; Woolf, 2013). According to Seo and Ginsburg (2006), 46% of a 15-minute period of a child’s natural play consists of mathematical principals. The shared play experiences of all participants

showed mathematical principals such as counting, sorting, problem solving, building, grouping by tens, or applying engineering concepts. Panksepp (2015) argued that play is instinctual and emerges at the right time, and as young children play, they construct meaning through observation, questioning, and problem solving. Incidentally, all participants in this study supported play-based learning throughout the curriculum irrespective of the pressure to meet benchmarks and goals, yet the element of time and top down pressure to do more academics proved to be challenging. According to three participants, there was not enough time in the day to expand on the children's interests because of the "pressure" to do more academics or "move them to the next level."

Findings from the second subquestion (How do the lived play experiences by kindergarten teachers manifest in the arrangement of the classroom?) showed a mixture of responses. According to Jones and Reynolds (2011), it is the responsibility of the teacher to arrange the space and materials so that children can play. Hawkins posited, "The teacher's contribution to play always begins with the physical environment" (2002, p. 52). Two participants shared how they rearranged the classroom based on the ideas of the children, one participant shared a desire to involve the children in creating what she called a nondescript play space in the classroom, and two other participants found it "challenging or tricky" due to the limitations of time, space, and materials. For example, one participant replaced a kitchen area with four new computers. The idea behind the new computers was to have a resource available to reinforce academic skills, yet when given choice time, a high percentage of children did not have interest in computers. The small percentage of children who had interest in the computer seemed to listen to songs

for a limited time and then left to play with hands-on materials. The kitchen area was kept outside the classroom and moved into the classroom during playtime.

Edwards and Cutler-McKenzie (2015) articulated that teachers are apt to prepare and engage in play-based learning if they trust in the value and the concept of play. All five participants in this study valued play, although some took on different roles during the play experience. Fleer (2011) argued that a dialectal model of play supports the intellectual development of young children because it initiates a social interaction between the teacher and child and among children themselves. Even though all participants had a scheduled time for play, not all participants took an active role in the play experience.

The findings showed evidence of different kinds of teacher participation in the play experience and suggested that the teacher's role in the play experience has the propensity to expand children's thinking through observation and participation. For example, two participants described the role as more of an observer and how they may join in at the request of the children or may join in to ask questions about the play scenario. Whereas the other participants modeled how to use materials, ask questions, or gets supplies. Jones and Reynolds, 2011 claimed that there are seven roles that a teacher can choose from within the context of children's play and the roles are teacher as stage manager, teacher as mediator, teacher as player, teacher as scribe, teacher as assessor, and communicator, and teacher as planner.

All participants seemed to scaffold their role within the lived play experience based on the time of year or classroom dynamics. For example, in the beginning of the

year all participants used play or choice time to model how to use materials, solve a problem, or how to put materials back. However, not all of participants took an active role in play. Due to time constraints and job demands, one participant mentioned that playtime is also used to catch up on the business aspect of the job such as preparing children's folders or making parent phone calls. Another participant mentioned that due to a deep level of pressure to show evidence of direct instruction, free play time was used to support children who lag behind in skills, yet intuitively the teacher felt that play in and of itself would better support language and vocabulary development in children.

The hermeneutic interview and LED process also inadvertently revealed an incompatibility between teachers' lived world interpretations and district expectations. For example, all participants described a felt sense of pressure to get "more academics" done. Teacher 5 said, "We have RTI meetings and we don't ever talk about how kids play or how they interact socially. It's the number they got and why did they get that number. . . It is hard to try to meet those demands." Teacher 5 explained that what seemed to matter most at the Response to Intervention meetings was the scores on computerized testing or what reading level children were on and why they have not moved to the next level. It appeared that the whole child was not taken into consideration during those meetings. Consequently early childhood scholars have also articulated a discrepancy between teachers' beliefs and actual classroom practices. There seems to be a discrepancy between teachers' beliefs and academic expectations in kindergarten (Sherwood & Reifel, 2013). According to Pardhan (2012), teachers perceive that children learn best through play, but many teachers often lean predominately towards a teacher-led

environment due to top down pressure, lack of time or training in play-based pedagogy, or deep-seated beliefs that direct teaching is the best way children learn. The findings from this study affirm what appears to be disparity between the reality of kindergarten and the expectations of a school system.

The social constructivist perspective of Vygotsky was the framework for the study because social constructivism emphasizes the coconstructive influences involved in social interactions. Incidentally, the active process of a play experience in kindergarten is most often juxtaposed within social situations (Vygotsky, 1978). In addition, Piaget (1962) argued that children build knowledge and schema through a ritualistic process of imitations, assimilations, and accommodations, and stated “play is in reality one of the aspects of any activity” (p. 105). The findings from this study aligned with the concept of social constructivism because the essence of teachers’ lived play experiences took place within the social environment of a school. The findings compellingly suggested that the nature of play instinctually and inevitably invites learning through social interactions.

The findings suggested that the coconstructive nature of play awakens a community through creative ideas, problem solving, and engaged excitement. Vygotsky (1978) argued, “Play is not the predominant feature of childhood, but it is a leading factor” (p. 101). Play experiences appear to lead to early learning and developmental growth, but due to the narrow academic focus, the influence of play on growth and learning is often overlooked (Frost, Wortham, & Reifel, 2012). Furthermore, the findings in this study suggested that the whole child could be overlooked in the educational process because the focus appeared to be on academic outcomes rather than process.

Additionally, play or social development was not considered in terms of understanding the learning of kindergarten children.

Lastly, in terms of understanding the impact that play has on development and learning, Vygotsky (1978) argued, “It is the essence of play that a new relation is created between the field of meaning and the visual field—that is, between situations in thought and real situations” (p. 104). The lived play experiences can actually guide the evaluative and instructional process through teachers’ observations and interactions with children. The findings for this study affirm that the concept of social constructivism was evident throughout participants’ lived play experiences. Moreover, the active process of social constructivism demonstrated in the lived play experiences appeared to integrate a sense of purpose within a school community. The three themes of community building, creative learning, and engaged excitement elicited from this study have great potential to serve a noble purpose in child development and early learning.

### **Limitations to the Study**

Although the participants were involved in end of the year business, the limitation of time did not impede the research process as all participants willingly volunteered to take part in the study irrespective of outside demands. As a researcher, I was committed to establishing a level of trustworthiness with the participants in terms of confidentiality especially since all participants happened to be from the same school district and two participants were from the same school. Participant recruitment started with an email and phone call to three school districts with agreement from one. Another possible limitation

to this study is that all teachers were from the same school district. Nevertheless, each participant's individual lived experiences were personal and different.

The demographic limitation that all participants were public school kindergarten teachers within a similar geographical region did not seem to be relevant to the results because understanding the shared phenomenon of play was the essence of the study in that each experience was personal. The one common descriptor used by most of the participants was the word "pressure" to do more academically or to move children to different reading levels. This felt experience may be limited by the fact that all participants worked within a geographic limitation of the same school district.

Further limiters included researcher bias, the number of participants, and the sampling method. As a veteran teacher who values play, my biases remained on the perimeter of the research in order to allow the lived experiences of each of the five participants to unfold as naturally as possible. The limitations of size and sampling did not impede the study since phenomenological research is designed to gain a deeper understanding of individual lived play experiences. The main goal was quality over quantity therefore the sample size was to remain small. Given the intricacies of most lived experiences, a smaller population is necessary in order to gain a depth of the meaning behind a shared phenomenon and although I originally planned for six participants, five did meet the minimum requirement suggested in phenomenology.



### **Recommendations for Action**

These findings can serve as a catalyst for future research in terms of gathering more lived play experiences of kindergarten teachers. Additionally, the findings could immediately prompt local school districts to begin to discuss play in kindergarten. The voices, perceptions, and experiences of kindergarten teachers are essential data particularly during a time when free play is compromised with a shared felt pressure to do more academics (Fleer, 2011; Gray, 2013; Miller & Almon, 2009; Sherwood & Reifel, 2010; Waltson, 2013). These findings suggested that choice or free play time offered the opportunity for teachers to learn through observation how young children approach their learning, develop vocabulary, apply concepts through imagination, construct knowledge, and interact socially. Gray (2013) argued that our society has formed an anti-play attitude that has impacted children's ability and time to play freely without adult agendas driving their actions. More research on the importance of choice or free play time could guide early childhood educators in terms of their role in the play experience.

Furthermore, at the local level establishing a professional learning community (PLC) that includes teachers and administrators dedicated to investigating the concept of play can ignite the social change process through discussion, observation and commitment to offering more choice based play experiences for kindergarten students. For example, an examination of the physical arrangement of the kindergarten classroom could be a starting point for discussion at the local level where teachers visit classrooms to gain insight on how to create the space for playful kindergarten learning. Additionally, kindergarten teachers could gather together and observe the play of young children.

Moreover, an additional recommendation is for kindergarten teachers to play more. In order to reach more kindergarten teachers, it is important to have professional development training that allows teachers to connect to their own play (Nell, Drew, & Bush, 2013). If teachers are to sustain a play-based learning environment, it is important that they are trained in play pedagogy. The consensus from all participants in this study suggested incompatibility between district expectations and teachers' lived experiences that can potentially cause a barrier to offering a more spontaneous, balanced, stress-free, and natural play-based learning environment.

In order to determine and break down the barriers to the play experience, administrative leaders and kindergarten teachers could come together to find a balance between teacher's concerns, district expectations, and the science of early development and learning. In an effort to offer a solution to finding a balance in the kindergarten classroom between academic work expectations and playful learning experiences, Ranz-Smith (2012) posited a Work-Play paradigm that establishes room for different play experiences that are child, teacher, and school-initiated. Ranz-Smith (2012) argued that a Work-Play paradigm secures space for play and leaves room for professional development. The Work-Play paradigm claims to allow for a balanced compromise within standards-based and play-based pedagogy.

### **Implications for Positive Social Change**

Knowledge of how kindergarten teachers experience play promotes positive social change because play organically launches a purposeful motivation to build a sense of community, initiates expression for creative learning, and propels engagement in real

life. Not only does the examination of kindergarten play experiences allow an opportunity for teachers to develop deeper insight into how children construct knowledge and build skill, but the examination of the lived play experience also allows teachers to dig deeper into their own beliefs about play-based teaching which can foster a reflective teaching practice that supports the building of a solid foundation for educational balance.

Knowledge of the essence of kindergarten teacher's lived play experiences has potential for social change in terms of professional development, academic expectations, and the arrangement of the classroom. Early childhood educators must value and share knowledge of the complexities and the advantages of play for positive change to occur. A teacher's role in the play experience sets the foundation for appropriate and balanced educational experiences. Additionally, understanding the importance of play experiences can impact social change in terms of reemphasizing appropriate and balanced early childhood pedagogy beyond kindergarten particularly since early childhood spans from birth to age eight. Furthermore, at the local level the more play experiences that kindergarten teachers' observe and describe, the better the chances of deeply knowing how young children approach learning.

An immediate positive social change at the local level with the formation of PLC dedicated to play is a starting point. A PLC, where the collective voices of knowledgeable teachers and administrators come together to build community similar to what kindergarten children do during a free play experience. The possibilities for social change in terms of play experiences, discussions, and professional development are beyond our knowing because, as Brian Sutton-Smith determined, "the greatest

importance about play is the way in which a person develops within it” (1997, p. 45) and to Brown (2009), “there is no true way to understand play without also understanding the feelings connected to the play because play is done for its own sake” (p. 19). In order for social change to occur in the kindergarten classroom, trust has to be established throughout each educational hierarchy. In order to build trust administrative leaders, teachers, and children are to be seen as equal contributors to a complex process. Play experiences that are gathered and shared at the local level unites most domains of child development and early learning, in essence play can guide the evaluative and instructional process that involves the whole child. Further, it is through the experience of play that a school system can begin to question, design, realign, extinguish or create curriculums standards that are based on children’s real life experiences.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this IPA was to gather the lived experiences regarding the nature of play by five kindergarten teachers from northern New England through pre-reflective description and reflective interpretation. As a veteran kindergarten teacher who values play, phenomenological research proved to be an inspiring process because the voices of kindergarten teachers regarding play emerged. My role as a researcher allowed kindergarten teachers to talk about play because at some level we all have experienced the same phenomenon. As the participants enthusiastically shared the play experiences as they lived through them, I noticed my own excitement ignite. Additionally, when the participants shared a felt pressure to do more academics, I could not only understand but I could also feel the internal conflict. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), “it’s

impossible to study something without having some effect on it” (p. 38). As a researcher, I felt personally and professionally connected to the phenomenon of play. As the stories or lived play experiences of each participant unfolded, I was able to relate, learn, and inquire. A passion for play prompted this study and the ultimate goal was to provide data that propels discussion about play experiences in kindergarten.

Lastly, the nature of IPA is to gain insight into the lived experiences of others. Although I interpreted the data, my personal biases could not manipulate the findings because the lived experiences were personally written, spoken, and checked by all five participants. Furthermore, acknowledgment of my role as a kindergarten teacher and researcher brought a level of trust to the research process because to some degree we have all shared the same phenomenon. Last of all, change starts with trust. If teachers begin to trust that they are harbingers of change, a collaborative community can take form. The three themes of *community building*, *creative learning*, and *engaged excitement* elicited from this study have great potential to serve a noble purpose in the field of early childhood education. In fact, the ambivalent and personal nature of play has a budding potential to serve noble purposes for the human race. Vygotsky argued, “A child’s greatest achievements are possible in play. Achievement that tomorrow will become her basic level of real action and morality” (1978, p. 100). Play can appear at first glance to be an enigma. Yet, through the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers, the enigma of play instinctually transmutes into a culture of creative, excited, self-directed, and cooperative learners. Kindergarten teachers have a pivotal place in education and an

active role in the lived play experience of young children can bring an aligned, balanced, and whole child approach to kindergarten pedagogy.

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## Appendix A: Site Permission Contact Form

Dear Superintendent or Principal,

My name is Robin Terrell and I am a doctoral student at Walden University. Currently I am in the process of recruiting kindergarten teachers for my doctoral study titled:

**The Lived Play Experiences of Kindergarten Teachers  
An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

You are receiving this e-mail because you have been are someone who can select or direct me to kindergarten teachers who have taught kindergarten for over 1 year. Teachers identified as possible participants in this study will meet the following criteria of having 1 year or more of kindergarten teaching experience.

Teachers who agree to participate will be asked to do the following:

- a) Complete a written lived experience description (a narrative) via email
- b) Sign a form of consent that explains confidentiality
- c) Participate in a one-on-one 60 minute conversational interview (at an agreed upon site) regarding teacher 's lived play experiences in kindergarten
- d) Review an electronic copy of the interview transcription for accuracy and plausibility and inform me of any clarifications

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and participants are free to withdraw from the study at any point in time. The benefit to being a participant in this study is that teachers' lived experiences and voices will be better understood in terms of understanding the complexities and advantages of teaching young children in kindergarten.

**Contacts and Questions:**

You may ask any questions you have now. Or if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher via phone at 207-441-5423 or email me @beopen22@gmail.com. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott. She is the Walden University representative who can discuss this with you. Her phone number is 612-312-1210. Walden University's approval number for this study is **IRB will enter approval number here** and it expires on **IRB will enter expiration date.**

Sincerely-

Robin Terrell

## Appendix B: Site Permission Cooperation Form

Superintendent of Schools  
RSU #

Date

Dear Robin Terrell,

I give permission for you to conduct the study entitled The Lived Play Experiences of Kindergarten Teachers, An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis within the School District. As part of this study, I authorize you to *visit the elementary school for interviewing purposes only after the official school day*. Individuals' participation will be voluntary and at their own discretion.

We understand that our organization's responsibilities may include: providing you with contact information in terms of an e-mail address to access kindergarten teachers in the district and we reserve the right to withdraw from the study at any time if our circumstances change.

I confirm that I am authorized to approve research in this setting and that this plan complies with the organization's policies.

I understand that the data collected will remain entirely confidential and may not be provided to anyone outside of the student's supervising faculty/staff without permission from the Walden University IRB.

Sincerely,  
Authorization Official  
Contact Information

\*Walden University policy on electronic signatures:

\*An electronic signature is just as valid as a written signature as long as both parties have agreed to conduct the transaction electronically. The Uniform Electronic Transactions Act regulates electronic signatures.

Electronic signatures are only valid when the signer is either

- (a) The sender of the email
- (b) Copied on the email containing the signed document. Legally an "electronic signature" can be: The person's typed name, their email address, or any other identifying marker.

\*Walden University staff verifies any electronic signatures that do not originate from a password-protected source (i.e., an email address officially on file with Walden).

## Appendix C: Participant Recruitment Email

Dear (participant name):

My name is Robin Terrell and I am a doctoral student at Walden University. Currently I am in the process of recruiting kindergarten teachers for my doctoral study titled:

**The Lived Play Experiences of Kindergarten Teachers,  
An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

You are receiving this e-mail because you have selected as a teacher who has experience in the kindergarten classroom and as someone who may be willing to participate in this study. Teachers identified as possible participants in this study have met the following criteria of having 1 year or more of kindergarten experience.

Teachers who agree to participate will be asked to do the following:

- a) Complete a written lived experience description (a narrative) via email  
See attached.
- b) Sign a form of consent
- c) Participate in a one-on-one 60 minute conversational interview (at an agreed upon site) regarding your experience with play based learning in kindergarten
- d) Review an electronic copy of the interview transcription for accuracy and plausibility and inform the researcher of any clarifications

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and participants are free to withdraw from the study at any point in time. The benefit to being a participant in this study is that teachers' lived experiences and voices will be better understood in terms understanding the complexities and advantages of teaching young children in kindergarten.

If you are interested in participating in this study please contact me by replying to this email or calling me at 207-441-5423.

Thank you for considering participation in this study.

Sincerely-

Robin Terrell

## Appendix D: Lived-Experience Description (LED)

The purpose of a lived-experience description (LED) is to gain access to other's personal stories. An LED can be compared to narrative writing or journaling where you can feel safe to retell the unfolding of a moment of time in your life. The LED is designed for you to be the "storyteller" and share your story as if you are *re-living* the experience again. Your descriptive voice is the essence of this assignment.

I ask: "Please write a direct account of a memorable playful learning experience as a teacher of kindergarten children as you lived through it."

Please know that there are no right or wrong answers and the experience could be positive or negative. You can start by writing a description about the environment, your feelings about play, or how things looked or sounded on that given day.

For example, it was Friday in January and we have been inside all week due to inclement weather. The energy in the room was more than I could handle. It seemed that the children needed time to move more and play, so I . . .

Or

I was outside on a sunny Monday afternoon for recess duty and I noticed four children using the slide as a plane and they were preparing to go on a trip to Florida and one of the children said . . .

Please allow me into your moment in time when you experienced or observed kindergarten children engaged in playful learning.



## Appendix E: Phenomenological-LED Interview Questions

1. Describe a memorable play experience in kindergarten
2. What does the play look like?
3. When does the play take place and for how long?
4. What does the play sound like?
5. What materials are the children using?
6. What are you doing during that time?
7. Describe how you participate in the play experience
8. What is it like for you to be part of this experience?
9. Describe how the experience of play influences planning or instruction?
10. Describe how the experience of play influences the arrangement or set up of your classroom?
11. Describe any possible barriers to play that you have experienced

## Appendix F: Confidentiality Agreement

I, \_\_\_\_\_, transcriptionist, agree to maintain full confidentiality in regards to any and all audio tapes and documentation received from Robin Terrell related to her doctoral study **The Lived Play Experiences of Kindergarten Teachers, An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**, I agree

1. To hold in confidence the identification of individuals that may be inadvertently revealed during the transcription process
2. To not make copies of any audio tapes or computerized files of the transcribed interview texts, unless specifically requested to do so by Robin Terrell
3. To store all study-related audiotapes and materials in a safe, secure location as long as they are in my possession.
4. To return all audiotapes and study-related documents to Robin Terrell in a complete and timely manner
5. To delete all electronic files containing study-related documents from my computer hard drive and back up devices.

I am aware that I can be held legally liable for any breach of this confidentiality agreement, and for any harm incurred by individuals if I disclose information contained in the audiotapes and/or files to which I have access.

Transcriber's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Transcriber's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_