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Parental Choice and Perceived Benefits of Reggio Emilia Inspired Programs

Heidi Harris
Walden University

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Walden University

College of Education

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Heidi Alene Harris

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Review Committee

Dr. Grace Lappin, Committee Chairperson, Education Faculty
Dr. Terri Edwards, Committee Member, Education Faculty
Dr. Danielle Hedegard, University Reviewer, Education Faculty

Chief Academic Officer
Eric Riedel, Ph.D.

Walden University
2018

Abstract

Parental Choice and Perceived Benefits of Reggio Emilia Inspired Programs

by

Heidi Alene Harris

MS, Capella University, 2010

BAA, Central Michigan University, 2004

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

November 2018

Abstract

Despite credible research to support a constructivist-based approach in early childhood programs, policymakers continued to push for a more academic-based philosophy in an effort to reach standardized testing goals. Reggio Emilia, a constructivist-based early childhood philosophy that originated in Northern Italy, has been shown to be an excellent model to facilitate optimum learning in young children. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate parental experiences when choosing the constructivist-based early childhood program, Reggio Emilia, for their children and to explore parents' perceived benefits after their children attended. A constructivist conceptual framework was used to provide context for the Reggio Emilia philosophy. A purposeful sampling strategy was used to select a Reggio Emilia inspired program, Foundations Early Learning Center, in the American Midwest. Five parents who had enrolled their children at Foundations Early Learning Center for a minimum of 6 months participated through in-depth interviews. Data were analyzed, categorized, and clustered into similar themes that described the phenomenon. Results indicated parents identified an overall satisfaction for choosing a Reggio Emilia experience for their preschool children. Ten perceived benefits from parents were identified that were associated with their children after they attended the Reggio Emilia inspired program. Findings of the current study have the potential to bring awareness to policymakers and early childhood program directors when making decisions on what type of educational philosophy to implement into early childhood programs with results favoring the choice of a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia inspired program over alternative options.

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Dedication

This dissertation is lovingly dedicated to my faithful family. To my love, Steven Riley Harris, who never faltered in his belief in me while I achieved my dream; it was not easy, but together, we did it. My children and best friends, Barrington Hotchkin Leo, and Riley Alene, who showed me the most important and joyous job in life is to be their mama. To my mother and father, who lovingly raised me to believe in myself and taught me to never give up, be adventurous, stay committed, and create my own path in life. My sister, Megan, who never stopped praying for my journey and my loyal brothers, Max and Brandon. To my Heavenly Father who is always my biggest fan.

Acknowledgments

In my first college human development course, I recall the stories of research conducted on babies living in Russian orphanages of something I will never forget. The outcome of these studies displayed malnourishment, neglect, and resulted in severe cognitive, social, emotional, and physical delays of young children who lived there. Caregivers lacked the ability to love, nurture, and give appropriate care to the children that they needed in order to thrive. The influence of these early studies and with God's direction, I have been given a strong desire to complete my doctorate in order to bring awareness of the impact that early experiences have on children's lives. Thank you to all of the early childhood professionals who have dedicated their time to create change in the field. To my professors, especially Dr. Helen Hagens from Central Michigan University, who spurred a love for early childhood in me from the beginning. Thank you to my colleagues over the years: Roxy Greenspan and my colleagues at Google Children's Centers who I felt honored to learn alongside of. Thank you to my dear friend, Silvia Ferguson, who did nothing but encourage me. To all my lovely friends who have been faithful, even when I wasn't.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

For parents, choosing an early childhood program to enroll their children in is an important and complex decision. Historically in the United States, there have been two different approaches to early childhood education that parents can choose from: the traditional, academic, educator-directed (nonconstructivist) philosophy versus the child-centered, constructivist philosophy (Glenn-Applegate, Pentimonti, & Justice, 2011; Walsh & Petty, 2007; Wana, 2010). With the continued push for high-stakes testing in public schools in the United States, the expectations for early childhood programs are narrowly focused on academics with an educator-directed approach to learning (Apple 2008; Brown, 2015). However, past research has revealed that a constructivist-based learning model that fosters open-ended, play-based exploration is most beneficial for preschool-aged children. Yet policymakers continue to push for an academic, predetermined curricular, nonconstructivist approach (Mathis, 2011; Öztürk, 2016; Recchia & Bentley, 2013).

One constructivist-based learning model, Reggio Emilia, originated in Northern Italy in the late 1940s with the support of community members and co-founder, Loris Malaguzzi. Since the 1980s, practices of Reggio Emilia infant, toddler, and preschool centers in Italy have inspired early childhood programs to implement the ideas into programs in the United States (Reggio Children, 2012). There was a gap in past research on parental experiences choosing this constructivist-based model as well as perceived benefits that their children experienced after attending a Reggio Emilia program in the United States (Andrews, 2012; Hall et al., 2013; Pinata, Barnett, Burchinal, & Thornburg,

2009). The purpose of the current study was to understand parental experiences in the United States for choosing a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia early childhood program and to further investigate what advantages children experienced after attending.

Background

A review of literature revealed a gap in examining reasons why parents in the United States have chosen one early childhood program, Reggio Emilia, over alternative, nonconstructivist-based program options and to further understand what perceived benefits parents identified after their children attended a Reggio Emilia inspired program (Andrews, 2012; Grogan, 2012; Johansen, Leibowitz, & Waite, 1996). Past research has been published on various topics regarding Reggio Emilia inspired program philosophy in the United States (Abdelfattah, 2015; Andrews, 2012; Bond, 2015; Firlick, 1995; McClow & Gillespie, 1998; Smith, 2014; Swann 2008). Research has also been conducted on benefits for children that have attended preschool (Hall et al., 2013; Hatcher, Nuner, & Paulsel, 2012; Mawdsley & Hauser-Cram, 2013; Recchia & Bently, 2013). However, there was a gap in the literature on parental experiences for choosing a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia inspired program as well as exploration of perceived benefits for children who attended a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia inspired program in a Midwestern state (Andrews, 2012; Grogan, 2012; Johansen et al., 1996).

The results of the current research may support parents who are faced with the decision to enroll their children in Reggio Emilia inspired early childhood programs in the United States. The results of the current study may also provide data for educators, parents, administrators, policymakers, and educational workers who have influence or

decisions on implementation or choice of early childhood philosophy. The results might contribute to social change by adding literature to why a constructivist-based early childhood program experience is developmentally appropriate and beneficial for children.

Chapter 1 will include a definition of the problem, the purpose of the study, and the research question. There will also be an explanation of the conceptual framework, the nature of the study, and definitions of terms related to the topic that will help the reader to understand the context of the topic. Finally, the chapter includes assumptions of the study, the scope and delimitations, what the limitations of the study were, an explanation of the significance for why the topic was chosen, and a summary.

Problem Statement

In the field of early childhood education, there is an on-going conflict between two different program philosophies: the academic, teacher-directed philosophy versus the interactive child-centered philosophy. The latter is constructivist in approach, and the former is nonconstructivist in approach. Evidence has indicated that an educator-directed, academic focused approach to learning in preschool is not developmentally or age appropriate and does not benefit young children's overall growth (Apple, 2008; Brown, 2015; Diamond, 2010; Nitecki & Chung, 2013). Rather, the interactive, child-centered, constructivist approach facilitates greater learning and developmental advances in young children because it supports the way children learn naturally (Christakis, 2016; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Nitecki & Chung, 2013). The problem is that despite credible research to support an interactive, constructivist-based curriculum model for preschoolers, policymakers continue to push for a more academic, sit-down, or "chalk and talk" based

preschool approach in an effort to endorse standardized testing supporters (Barbarin et al., 2008; Bodrova & Leong, 2005; Brown, 2013; Kim & Darling, 2009; Öztürk, 2016; Swann, 2008).

The Reggio Emilia educational philosophy has been shown to be an excellent model to facilitate optimum learning in young children (Bond, 2015; Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2012; Firlick, 1995; New, 1999). Reggio Emilia programs are grounded in developmentally appropriate practices; emergent, project-based learning; and an approach to learning that considers the whole child. The intention of the current research was to provide further data to support developmentally appropriate practice and parents' preferences for a constructivist-based preschool over policymakers' insistence on inappropriate elementary school standards in preschool (Barbarin et al., 2008).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to investigate parental experiences in choosing a Reggio Emilia inspired early childhood program for their preschool children and to explore perceived benefits parents identified after their children attended the program. Parents face a difficult decision when choosing an early childhood program that is a best fit for their child. It is the goal of many parents to determine if there is one early childhood program philosophy that is superior over alternatives (Andrews, 2012; Ransom, 2012; Walsh & Petty, 2007; Wana, 2010). In the United States, there are a multitude of early childhood program philosophies for parents to choose from that may include, but are not limited to, Bank Street, High-Scope, Montessori, Reggio Emilia, and Waldorf (Walsh & Petty, 2007). Previous researchers

have examined various aspects of Reggio Emilia inspired programs in the United States, but there is a gap in investigations on parental experiences and associated perceived benefits for choosing a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia program for their children (Abdelfattah, 2015; Andrews, 2012; Bond, 2015; Firlick, 1995; McClow & Gillespie, 1998; Smith, 2014; Swann 2008). With minimal research published on how Reggio Emilia philosophy has been adapted into early childhood programs in the United States, this study was conducted to understand lived experiences for parents choosing a Reggio Emilia program in the American Midwest for their children.

Research Questions

Research questions of phenomenological research should be defined, discussed, and clarified so the intent and purpose of the investigation are evident (Moustakas, 1994). The following research questions provided direction to the current study:

1. What were the lived experiences of parents who chose to enroll their children in a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia inspired early childhood program?
2. What were the associated benefits that parents perceived were achieved after they enrolled their children in a Reggio Emilia inspired program?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework that grounded the current study was the theory of constructivism, which helps explain how humans construct knowledge and meaning from real-life experiences. Reggio Emilia early childhood programs are rooted in the constructivist learning theory developed by Bruner, Dewey, Gardner, Piaget, Vygotsky, and Malguzzi (Edwards et al., 2012; Firlick, 1995; Hewett, 2001). For the purpose of the

current study, I used a multi-dimensional conceptual framework of Bruner, Dewey, and Gardner that helped to explain philosophical underpinnings of Reggio Emilia programs. The theory of constructivism related to the research questions and design of the current study because the topic being studied, Reggio Emilia philosophy, was founded on the theory of constructivism. A deeper explanation of the conceptual framework of constructivism will be explained in the literature review in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

Choosing one research design over others should be determined by the intended outcome of the study (Creswell, 2013). The intention of a phenomenological design is to find meaning through lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). For this current study, the intended outcome was to examine the meaning of choices, perceived benefits, and overall experiences of parents. Through a qualitative research design, researchers are able to answer meanings of topics and experiences (Moustakas, 1994). A phenomenological design allows researchers to examine human science behavior related to pedagogy, parent beliefs, and education (Van Manen, 1990). The nature of the current study fit best with a phenomenological research design because the intent was to find the meaning behind parent beliefs on Reggio Emilia educational pedagogy.

The goal of the current research was to understand the essence of the lived experiences of parents whose children attended the same Reggio Emilia inspired early childhood program in the American Midwest. In the current study, a holistic approach was used to investigate the identical phenomenon of five parent lived experiences. Face-to-face in-depth interviews with parents was the only data collection tool used.

Definition of Terms

Listed below are definitions of key concepts in the current study that will help the reader to understand the context of the terms that were used:

Atelier: A workshop or studio space in Reggio Emilia early childhood programs; ateliers are a foundational part of the philosophy and include an atelierista (studio educator) to support the expression of self for children through a relationship with materials (Gandini, Hill, Cadwell, & Schwall, 2005).

Developmentally appropriate practice (DAP): An approach to teaching grounded in research on how young children develop, learn, and what is known about effective and appropriate early education. Developmentally appropriate practices are designed to promote young children's optimal learning and development (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

Early childhood programs: Refers to programs that provide early care and education that serve children between the ages of infancy to kindergarten entry (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

One hundred languages: An integral part of Reggio Emilia philosophy is the belief that children learn in a multitude of ways or "one hundred languages." In Reggio Emilia programs, children are given a variety of mediums to learn through that include visual, language, sounds, touch, taste, smells, theater, creative arts (Reggio Children, 2012).

Reggio emilia early childhood programs: A public system of childcare and educational programs in the city of Reggio Emilia, Italy, built by parents, community members, and educators for over 50 years (Edwards et al., 2012).

Reggio emilia inspired: To gather inspiration from the practices of the original Reggio Emilia infant, toddler, and preschool programs in Reggio Emilia, Italy. A Reggio Emilia inspired program is an early childhood program outside of the original programs in Italy that gain inspiration to follow the philosophy of Reggio Emilia (Hendrick, 1997).

North American Reggio Emilia Alliance (NAREA): Organization for educators, policymakers, and interested community members in North America that supports collaboration with educators of Reggio Emilia, Italy (North American Reggio Emilia Alliance, 2018).

Assumptions

In the current study, one Reggio Emilia inspired early childhood program in the American Midwest was chosen for the data collection site. Although educators, administration, and staff in the chosen site were committed and used practices from Italian Reggio Emilia early childhood programs, no program will be able to replicate the pedagogy of the original schools in Italy. The culture of the community, country, and people in Italy play a significant part in how the original Reggio Emilia early childhood programs function and operate (Firlick, 1995; Swann, 2008). There is no formal training for Reggio Emilia programs in the United States to follow (as there is in Montessori or HighScope for example); early childhood programs in the United States can only use

inspirations from Reggio Emilia as closely as possible but will never be able to replicate the original program practices in Italy (Abdelfattah 2015; Zorec, 2015).

In the context of the current study, the data collection site was chosen after close evaluation of the quality of implementation of the main tenets of Reggio Emilia practices that included (a) a strong vision of children; (b) educators as researchers and coconstructors in learning; (c) relationships between students, educators, and families were fostered; (d) a constructivist foundation; (e) the inclusion of the environment as third teacher; (f) documentation; (g) one hundred languages of children and inclusion of atelier; and (h) the project approach to learning. Although there were other practices that contributed to being inspired by Reggio Emilia programs, the above-mentioned practices were considered the main tenets of Reggio Emilia program practice and was used as the evaluation method for choosing the data collection site (Bond, 2015; Edwards et al., 2012; Elliot, 2005; Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Children, 2010; Smith, 2014; Swann, 2008).

Scope and Delimitations

The area of interest for the current study was to examine why parents chose Reggio Emilia programs over alternative program options. I further examined what perceived benefits were associated with their children's experiences in a Reggio Emilia inspired program. The focus of the current study was chosen over other focuses related to Reggio Emilia inspired programs because there was a gap in research on this topic. The main participants in the current study were parents. With the majority of past research on

this topic collected from educators' viewpoints, the collection of data from parents was chosen to bring a different perspective from the participants.

Disadvantages of children who attended Reggio Emilia inspired programs in the United States have not been included as the purpose of the current research. It is important to acknowledge that past researchers have investigated disadvantages regarding the implementation of the European based philosophy, Reggio Emilia, into early childhood programs in the United States (Abdelfattah, 2015; Elliott, 2005). To control for bias, a brief explanation of identified disadvantages is included in Chapter 2.

Historically in the United States, progressive educational programs like Reggio Emilia have served middle- to upper-class families (Smith, 2014). For the purpose of the current study, I chose a data collection site that was Reggio Emilia inspired. The chosen data collection site was tuition-based and included families who were able to afford the early childhood program, possibly excluding families in a lower socioeconomic class. In terms of transferability of the current study, the results of five parent participants resulted in rich enough data to transfer to other contexts (see Creswell, 2013). When transferring results of the current research to future research studies, it is important to consider that the parent participants were all of higher-socioeconomic status.

Limitations

The chosen research design, phenomenology, came with advantages and disadvantages. One disadvantage of the phenomenological research design is researcher bias. Although bias was controlled through epoche, the process does not eliminate all biases (Moustakas, 1994). In phenomenological designs, the researcher should avoid

making hypotheses and focus on a topic with an unbiased, new perspective, creating a question or problem to guide the study that generates findings for future research and reflection (Moustakas, 1994). As the researcher of the current study, I reflected on my own experiences of working in multiple Reggio Emilia inspired early childhood programs in the United States and searched for biases as I conducted my research (see Creswell, 2013). I controlled for bias through bracketing and gained awareness of the assumptions I brought to my research through my past personal experiences related to Reggio Emilia philosophy (see Moustaka, 1994).

A second limitation was that data were collected from parents through interviews at least 6 months after their children started at Foundations Early Learning Center. Before I conducted the interviews, I anticipated that parents may have had difficulty recalling reasons why they chose a Reggio Emilia inspired program after 6 months had passed. Yet, I found that parents seemed to recall details of their choice of Reggio Emilia with ease.

Significance

This study was unique because it addressed an under-researched area of early childhood education related to Reggio Emilia early childhood philosophy in the American context. Results from the current study display parents' identified advantages and satisfaction of a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia early childhood program for their children over alternative program options (see Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009; see Miller & Almon, 2009). In the field of early childhood education, decisions are made from policymakers who seek data to understand if a project-based, interactive,

constructivist-based approach is beneficial for young children (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Miller & Almon, 2009). For policymakers and educators who contribute to making decisions on what philosophy early childhood programs follow, the results of the current study may encourage examination of the associated benefits parents identified in choosing the Reggio Emilia philosophy.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to investigate parental perceptions of choosing a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia inspired early childhood program for their children and the perceived benefits associated with children who have attended a Reggio Emilia inspired program. Included in Chapter 1 was an explanation of the current study that included information on the background and statement of the problem. A description of the research questions helped to create the purpose of the research. Chapter 1 also included a discussion of the conceptual framework, operational definitions, limitations, delimitations, assumptions, and significance of why the study should be conducted.

Chapter 2 will include a current review of literature related to Reggio Emilia early childhood programs with a focus on past research on parental choices and benefits of children attending a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia inspired early childhood program. Options for early childhood programs in the United States that parents had the potential to choose from will be included. To give context to how Reggio Emilia programs were created, a brief history of the original programs in Reggio Emilia, Italy will be described. An explanation of main tenets of Reggio Emilia philosophy will also

be explained. Perceived benefits that have been identified for children who have attended a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia program are added, and an explanation will be given on Reggio Emilia inspired programs and how programs in the United States have implemented the philosophy. A section on perceived disadvantages of Reggio Emilia inspired programs in the United States is also included. The conceptual framework of the constructivist theory for the current study will be described. Last, an explanation of past research related to the current study that included studies with the similar conceptual framework, phenomenology approach, and seminal works will be included.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

A constructivist-based early childhood philosophy like Reggio Emilia has been shown as a best learning model for preschool-aged children, yet policymakers continue to push for an academic, teacher-directed philosophy instead (Apple, 2008; Brown, 2015; Diamond, 2010; Nitecki & Chung, 2013; Ozturck, 2016). Past research has been conducted on benefits for children that attended preschool but not specifically on what children experienced as beneficial after they attended a Reggio Emilia preschool program in the United States (Abdelfattah, 2015; Elliott, 2005; Hall et al., 2012; Hatcher et al., 2012; Mawdsley & Hauser-Cram, 2013; Recchia & Bently, 2013; Swann, 2008). Past research has also been conducted on various aspects of Reggio Emilia philosophy, but there is a lack of literature on why parents in the United States choose Reggio Emilia inspired programs for their children (Andrews, 2012; Grogan, 2012; Johansen et al., 1996). In the current study, I investigated the lived experiences of parents in the American Midwest who chose to send their children to a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia inspired program and the perceived benefits for their children who attended the program.

Chapter 2 will include a review of previous literature based on Reggio Emilia early childhood programs in the United States with a focus on studies that have examined benefits associated with Reggio Emilia philosophy and parental experiences with their children after the children have attended a Reggio Emilia inspired program. The literature review will be structured so that previous literature related to the current study will be

embedded into topics included in Chapter 2. Included in Chapter 2 will be an explanation of search strategies that were used to conduct the literature review. A detailed description of constructivist versus nonconstructivist educational philosophies will be explained next. Common options for early childhood programs in the United States will be given. To help understand Reggio Emilia philosophy deeper, a brief history of Reggio Emilia programs in Italy will be explained. The main tenets of Reggio Emilia philosophy will be identified and explained. Next, identified perceived benefits associated with Reggio Emilia early childhood programs will be added. A context for how programs in the United States have implemented Reggio Emilia philosophy will be included. Perceived disadvantages of Reggio Emilia inspired programs will be added next. A deeper explanation for the chosen conceptual framework of the constructivist theory will also be included. An explanation of past research related to the current study will be given in full detail. Lastly, Chapter 2 will end with a summary.

Literature Search Strategies

An exhaustive literature review was conducted through keyword searches of multiple educational databases that included Education Research Complete, ERIC, SAGE premier, and Google Scholar. Search terms were used in a variety of combinations that helped to locate peer-reviewed scholarly journals and other materials related to the current study. The following search terms were used: *early childhood, early childhood programs, preschool, Reggio Emilia, Reggio Emilia inspired programs, Reggio Emilia benefits, parents, parents choice, parents perceptions, families choice, phenomenology, constructivism, choosing preschool, Montessori parents, benefits preschool, kindergarten*

readiness, constructivist based preschool, non-constructivist, academic based preschool, teacher-directed, behaviorism versus constructivism, benefits of constructivist, developmentally appropriate, standardized testing, and benefits of early childhood programs.

Additional searches to find resources were conducted after the analysis of the reference lists of peer-reviewed articles. Resources were also chosen for the literature review based on their relevance of 5 years or newer. Some seminal articles and books were chosen for their historical impact and relation to the topic at hand. Books were also included that supported the understanding of Reggio Emilia philosophy. In the search for articles that were related to parents that chose Reggio Emilia inspired early childhood programs in the United States, a limited amount of articles were found. Dissertations related to the current topic were included to fill the gap in the limited amount of scholarly articles that were published.

Conceptual Framework: Constructivist Theory

The multi-dimensional conceptual framework of the theories from Bruner, Dewey, and Gardner helped to explain the philosophical underpinnings of Reggio Emilia early childhood philosophy and gave deeper understanding of the purpose of the current study.

Constructivism

The educational theory that grounded the current study was the theory of constructivism, which helps explain how people construct their own knowledge of the world through experiences and their reflection on those experiences. The constructivist

theory was the foundation of Reggio Emilia early childhood programs because the theory stresses a strong image of the child, negotiated learning, documentation, and social relationships that were fostered in Reggio Emilia programs (Schneider et al., 2014). According to Swann (2008), the constructivist foundation of Reggio Emilia programs includes the theories of Piaget (1937/1954), Dewey (1941), Hawkins (1986), Bruner (1980), and Vygotsky (1934/1986).

Understanding the constructivist framework as the foundation of Reggio Emilia early childhood philosophy helps explain what benefits may be expected of children who attended a Reggio Emilia inspired program. Reggio Emilia early childhood programs have integrated the main tenets of constructivist theories of the following educational theorists and philosophers, but are not limited to Bronfenbrenner, Bruner, Dewey, Erikson, Freinet, Gardner, Piaget, and Vygotsky (Edwards et al., 2012; Fyfe, 2011; Hanna, 2014; Swann, 2008).

As the researcher of the current study, I felt that the constructivist-based theories of Bruner, Dewey, and Gardner gave the most accurate understanding of Reggio Emilia early childhood program philosophy (Bruner, 1966, 1977; Dewey, 1938, 1990; Gardner, 1982; 2011). The theories of Bruner, Dewey, and Gardner are focused on three main tenets that explained the Reggio Emilia constructivist program philosophy because the theories are all based on the value children as active participants in education, integration of the multiple intelligences and strengths of children in learning, and belief that social relationships, classroom environments, educators, and materials shape students' learning (Schneider et al., 2014).

Bruner

Jerome Bruner was one of the theorists who contributed to the constructivist theory of education (Yilmaz, 2008). Bruner believed that children should be given the opportunity to make sense of the world through actively participating in their own education and was one of the key tenets of Reggio Emilia philosophy (Palmer, 2001). Malaguzzi acknowledged Bruner as a source of inspiration in the creation of Reggio Emilia early childhood programs because of his contribution to the constructivist theory of education and his perspective on the educators role in learning. Bruner's approach to teaching requires educators to ask questions and emphasizes that educators scaffold learning with students (Edwards et al., 2012).

Dewey

The theory of constructivism was founded on Dewey's belief that children learn through play and children find meaning in their experiences when they are given the opportunity to be involved in the process (Hanna, 2013). Dewey's constructivist approach to education values the child as a capable participant in the learning process and was used as the foundation of Reggio Emilia philosophy (Dodd-Nufrio, 2011). Like the foundation of Reggio Emilia program philosophy, Dewey valued the process of education with project-based learning as the main tenet of Dewey's theory (Glassman & Whaley, 2000). Dewey believed that educators should connect students to meaningful experiences versus predetermined topics out of a planning book, which is also integrated in Reggio Emilia early childhood programs (Glassman & Whaley, 2000).

Gardner

Gardner was an educational philosopher from the United States who created the multiple intelligences theory in the 1970s with value placed on how each human learns in a multitude of ways (Gardner, 2011). Gardner was acknowledged as one of the philosophers who contributed to the constructivist theory of learning (Fogarty, 1999). Gardner identified eight intelligences: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, bodily kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist. Since the creation of the original eight multiple intelligences, Gardner suggested that existential and moral intelligences should also be included (Gardner, 2011). The main tenets of the multiple intelligence theory are based on the belief that every person has a unique mix of strengths and weaknesses within these eight intelligences (Palmer, 2001).

In a constructivist classroom, like in Reggio Emilia inspired programs, educators interpret multiple intelligence theory into practice and give students the opportunity to learn in various ways (Gardner, 2011). In the original Reggio Emilia early childhood programs in Italy, educators integrated aspects of the multiple intelligence theory. In Reggio Emilia, the *hundred languages of children* is the term used and is similar to Gardner's multiple intelligences theory that supports children having the opportunity to express themselves in hundreds of ways (Krechevsky, Mardell, Rivard, & Wilson, 2013).

Studies with Conceptual Framework of Constructivism

Past qualitative researchers have examined aspects of Reggio Emilia inspired practices in the United States and used constructivism as the conceptual framework for the studies (Elliott, 2005; Mathis, 2011; New, 1989; Recchia & Bentley, 2011). For

example, Elliott (2005) investigated the faculty at a laboratory early childhood program in the United States that adopted a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia philosophy into their practice. Similar to the current study, Elliott used a constructivist theory as the framework for the study because it aligned with the philosophy of Reggio Emilia. Additionally, Swann (2008) investigated the constructivist foundation of Reggio Emilia inspired programs through a quasi-naturalist study in the United States, and explained that the constructivist foundation of Reggio Emilia programs includes the theories of Bruner (1980), Dewey (1941), Hawkins (1986), Piaget (1937/1954), Vygotsky, (1934/1986), and others.

Constructivist Versus Nonconstructivist Philosophical Model

In the field of early childhood education, there are two diverse program philosophies: the academic, educator-directed, nonconstructivist philosophy versus the play-based, interactive, coconstructivist (educator and child) philosophy. Parents have found it difficult to choose one early childhood program option over alternative options when there are a variety of programs available to enroll their children (Ransom, 2012). When parents make decisions of what type of program to enroll their children in, parents are sometimes confused in what program model they should chose for their children with typical choices between a constructivist and a nonconstructivist type of program (Ransom, 2012).

An overarching problem in the field of early childhood education in the United States has been that because of standardized testing in public schools there have been unreasonable expectations put onto preschool students to be prepared for testing in

kindergarten (Barbarin et al., 2008; Christakis, 2016). Many early childhood programs affiliated with public schools use an academic-based, nonconstructivist philosophy to match the standards set by policymakers. The goal of these public affiliated preschools has been to prepare preschool children for kindergarten with worksheets, predetermined curriculum, and an educator-down approach in order to promote preparation for standardized tests (Apple, 2008). Despite policymakers' creation of standards not appropriate for preschool-aged children, past research has shown that young children naturally learn from play in a constructivist-based program that is developmentally, age, and culturally appropriate like in Reggio Emilia (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

Options for Early Childhood Programs in the United States

There have been a variety of philosophies in the United States that early childhood programs have followed over the years—some constructivist-based, some nonconstructivist-based, and some with a combination of both. Various types of philosophical approaches to early childhood programs in the United States have included: Bank Street, High-Scope, Montessori, Reggio Emilia, Waldorf, play-based, or academic-based (Wana, 2010). Additionally, Walsh and Petty (2007) conducted a 10-year content analysis of early childhood program options offered in the United States and concluded that six philosophical approaches to early childhood programs are the most frequently used program options in the United States: Bank Street, Head Start, High Scope, Montessori, Reggio Emilia, and Waldorf. Federally funded Head Start programs have varied by philosophical approach and is a popular early childhood program option for families of low socioeconomic status (Zigler & Styfco, 2010). Alternative early

childhood program options in the United States include programs with a religious affiliation, general play-based constructivist programs that do not follow a certain philosophical approach, or general academic-based programs (Wana, 2010).

Past research has indicated that parents choose early childhood programs for their children based on extrinsic (cost, location, reliability, availability, etc.) and intrinsic (group size, educational philosophy, quality of educators, etc.) factors (Grogan, 2012; Ransom, 2012). For the purpose of the current study, parental decisions for choosing an early childhood program based on one intrinsic factor, the program's philosophical approach, was investigated. The one philosophical approach option investigated in the current study was Reggio Emilia.

Brief History of Reggio Emilia Programs in Italy

The practices and philosophy of Reggio Emilia early childhood programs have been inspired, adopted, and implemented in early childhood programs in the United States since the 1980s (Gandini et al., 2008; Hall & Rudkin, 2011; Krechevsky et al., 2013). For readers to understand how programs in the United States have gained inspiration from Reggio Emilia, the history of Reggio Emilia programs in Italy will be explained. The city-operated Reggio Emilia early childhood programs were founded in Reggio Emilia, located north of Bologna in the region of Emilia-Romagna in the country of Italy (Edwards et al., 2012). Malaguzzi, a community member in Reggio Emilia, was an educational philosopher and local educator who was credited for the creation of Reggio Emilia early childhood programs along with community members. After the end of World War II in the 1940s, Malaguzzi and community members built and created

buildings for the early childhood programs in Reggio Emilia (Reggio Children, 2012). It took years to develop and create the schools and the first Reggio Emilia early childhood program was opened in 1963, years after Malaguzzi and the community started the efforts (Edwards et al., 2012).

The opening of city-operated Reggio Emilia early childhood programs were a result of various political, cultural, and social struggles that included more women who worked outside of the home, reduced control of education through the central government, and the creation of an innovative approach to school that was different from the previously Catholic dominated, fascist preschools (Reggio Children, 2012). Before the creation of Reggio Emilia early childhood programs, Catholic churches were the main provider of preschool education (Edwards et al., 2012; Reggio Children, 2012). Women's groups in the community of Reggio Emilia and the men who supported them wanted an educational approach for children that were not controlled by the fascist government as it was before World War II (Fyfe, 2011). Malaguzzi led the movement, along with community members, and envisioned an early childhood program that honored children's capabilities and thinkings, embraced a democratic spirit, and focused on a place that accepted all children to provide excellence in education (Fyfe, 2011). The philosophy of Reggio Emilia programs is based on the ideas of educational theorists and philosophers such as Bronfenbrenner, Bruner, Dewey, Erikson, Freinet, Gardner, Hawkins, Piaget, and Vygotsky (Edwards et al., 2012; Fyfe, 2011; Hanna, 2014). The Reggio Emilia early childhood programs were intentionally built on the theory of constructivism, progressive

education, and founded on the belief that students have the right to be active participants in their own education (Swann, 2008).

Reggio Emilia infant, toddler, and preschool programs have grown and progressed over time. In 1968 there were 12 Reggio Emilia classrooms, in 1970 there were 24 classrooms, in 1972 there were 34 classrooms, and in 1980 Reggio Emilia programs expanded to 58 classrooms located in 22 buildings (Edwards et al., 2012). Throughout the years the amount of programs in Italy continued to grow to support the demand for early childhood programs in Reggio Emilia. As of 2015 there were 46 infant, toddler, and preschool programs in Reggio Emilia (North American Reggio Emilia Alliance, 2018).

International Recognition

In the 1980s the first published research on Reggio Emilia programs in Italy gained international attention as the most renowned high-quality, community-supported early childhood programs in the western world (Firlick, 1995; New, 1989). One way the Reggio Emilia early childhood programs gained international recognition was through a traveling educational exhibit, *The Hundred Languages of Children*, that was created in 1981 (North American Reggio Emilia Alliance, 2018). *The Hundred Languages of Children* traveling exhibit was created by educators in Reggio Emilia who shared the work of children of Reggio Emilia programs in Italy with the rest of the world. As of 2018, the traveling exhibit continues to travel the world and traveled to 31 countries including the United States, Canada, Europe, Asia, and Mexico (Baldini et al., 2010). A second way Reggio Emilia early childhood programs gained international recognition

was after a 1991 Newsweek article identified the Reggio Emilia programs as the best early childhood programs in the world (Newsweek, 1991).

Main Tenets of Reggio Emilia Philosophy

To fully understand the implications of Reggio Emilia early childhood programs, the underlying theoretical tenets of the educational philosophy were explained (Fyfe, 2011). The theoretical tenets of Reggio Emilia early childhood programs as outlined by Reggio Emilia educators in the pamphlet, *Indications Preschools and Infant-Toddler Centres of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia*, have included (for the purpose of the length of the paper, I have merged similar tenets together) (Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Children, 2010):

1. Education as a Right: Promotion of Potentials of Children
2. Children as Active Participants
3. The Hundred Languages and Importance of Creative Arts
4. Educator as Researcher and Progettazione
5. Educational Documentation
6. Organization of Time
7. Long-Term Investigations and Project Work
8. Environment as the Third Teacher
9. Relationships Between Children, Educators, Families, and Community

Education as a Right: Promotion of Potentials of Children

Education was viewed as a right of all children in the early childhood programs of Reggio Emilia, Italy (Fyfe, 2011). The first proclaimed tenet behind Reggio Emilia early

childhood programs was that Malaguzzi and community members envisioned a school where children were viewed as contributing citizens with rights, seen as capable, and would be listened to (Edwards et al., 2012). Malaguzzi explained, “If we believe children have rights we must treat their ideas seriously, learn with them side-by-side, and provide rich opportunities to develop their intelligence; not just offer safe and secure custodial service to meet their basic needs” (Fyfe, 2011, p. 587). In Reggio Emilia programs, children’s ideas were valued, educators listened to children, and children were viewed as competent and capable. Educators took time to have dialogue with children to make children’s ideas heard (Fyfe, 2011). Zorec (2015) reported that because children in Reggio Emilia programs were respected, listened to, and were included in the participation of their own learning, results of this approach to education indicated high levels of self- confidence and strong desires to learn in children.

Children as Active Participants

The foundational tenet of Reggio Emilia philosophy is the constructivist-based approach that is unique from alternative early childhood philosophies. In Reggio Emilia programs and a foundation of constructivist-based programs is that children are included as active participants in their education. Roth and Mansson (2011) explained that children were treated as citizens in Reggio Emilia classrooms, “This view of children as having the capacity for activity, research, and participation serves as the basis for choosing projects involving challenges, children’s own questions, and personal initiative” (pg. 252). Zorec (2015) conducted a study in a preschool in Slovenia that found inspiration from the Reggio Emilia pedagogy. A cornerstone of Reggio Emilia philosophy included

the participation of children in all aspects of education (Zorec, 2015). Results of Zorec's research indicated that two of the most important factors in implementing Reggio Emilia philosophy was to include children in the whole education process and to view children as strong and capable (2015). With constructivism as the foundation for learning in Reggio Emilia pedagogy, it was believed that students needed to play an active role in learning to support children in the acquisition and construction of knowledge (Zorec, 2015).

The Hundred Languages and Importance of Creative Arts

The *hundred languages of children* is the phrase in Reggio Emilia programs used to honor the diversity in thinking and learning of each and every child. In Reggio Emilia programs, children are given a multitude of opportunities to express themselves visually, musically, creatively and through various mediums such as paint, clay, paper, and dance (Reggio Children, 2012). Bond (2015) investigated how music education was integrated into Reggio Emilia inspired programs in the United States. Bond found that one of the main tenets of Reggio Emilia programs was to embrace the *hundred languages of learning* that gave children opportunities to symbolically represent their thoughts through clay, wire, play, blocks, and other mediums (2015). In an effort to support the *hundred languages of children* studios (ateliers) and studio educators (atelieristas) are included in every early childhood program in Reggio Emilia, Italy (Edwards et al., 2012). The conception of the atelier was described by Lella Gandini,

One of the central tenets of the Reggio approach that has guided and continues to

drive the Italian educators' work is the idea that every child is a creative child, full of potential, with the desire and right to make meaning out of life within a context of rich relationships, in many ways, and using many languages. It was from this fundamental premise that the atelier was conceived and developed, and still evolves. (Gandini et al., 2005, pg. 7)

The preservice participants from Vatalaro, Szente, and Levin's (2015) phenomenology study attended a two-week study tour in Reggio Emilia early childhood programs in Italy. Results of Vatalaro et al. found that study tour participants reported an increased understanding of Reggio Emilia practices, specifically related to how creative and critical thinking opportunities provided relationships to learning for students (2015). One study tour participant described the level of creativity of children in Reggio Emilia programs, "The natural touches and creativity brought me to tears" (Vatalaro et al.). Perceived benefits of Reggio Emilia programs included giving children opportunities to create through materials, relationships with the environment, and the inclusion of the *hundred languages of learning* in classrooms (Vatalaro et al.).

Swann (2008) conducted a quasi-naturalist study that examined how students in a Reggio Emilia inspired program in the United States constructed knowledge. Students were observed as they explored art materials to determine how the constructivist foundation of Reggio Emilia pedagogy contributed to artistic development in students (Swann, 2008). Results indicated that when students were provided the opportunity to explore the same art materials repeatedly, a positive impact on relational attention and artistic abilities emerged in students (Swann, 2008). Results also displayed that children

who attended a Reggio Emilia program had an advanced level of creativity and acquired self-expression skills (Swann, 2008).

Educator as Researcher and Progettazione

Educators in Reggio Emilia classrooms work co-constructively with students. An obvious difference between how Reggio Emilia educators interacted in collaboration with students compared to how traditional educators typically interacted with students in a teacher-directed manner (Schneider et al., 2014). The approach Reggio Emilia educators use with their students includes respecting students theories, viewing children as capable, involving students in developing curriculum, creating classroom environments to support learning, and making learning visible through documentation (Lyon & Donahue, 2009). Educators in Reggio Emilia engage in professional development opportunities, conduct research, and reflect on their educational practice (Edwards & Gandini, 2015).

The term *progettazione* used in Reggio Emilia programs described the planning process of educators: designing learning provocations, providing stimulating classroom environments, and engaging in professional development opportunities (Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Children, 2010). The underlying intention of *progettazione* was to create organic learning experiences for students instead of implementing predetermined curriculum in classrooms (Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Children, 2010). Educators in Reggio Emilia programs work together to plan, organize, and research interests of students to develop learning experiences.

A significant part of *progettazione* in Reggio Emilia programs was educators taking time for reflection of their educational practice. Parnell (2012) conducted a

phenomenological study that examined three educators who reflected on their practices of working in an atelier at a Reggio Emilia inspired early childhood program in Oregon. The results of Parnell's research explained positive results when educators took the time for reflection and was identified as a benefit of Reggio Emilia early childhood programs (2012). Parnell explained why educator reflection was important,

Ultimately, we find that educators must articulate and express their professional beliefs, assumptions and values held in the ways we teach and learn as well as reflect together to create new meaning in school experiences. Such processes develop understanding, such as when Marsha and Suzy explain their feelings of disconnectedness from classroom teachers and we expound on creative solutions to their dilemma. (Parnell, 2012, p. 131)

Merz and Swim (2011) observed principal, Dr. Renbarger, who was interested in implementing Reggio Emilia philosophy into early childhood programs at her school in the state of Indiana. Dr. Renbarger used a reflective practice strategy, as used in Reggio Emilia programs, that gave educators opportunities to discuss difficult topics and examined their own teaching practices. Results of the single case study displayed the importance and benefits of reflection practices of educators in Reggio Emilia programs (Merz & Swim, 2011).

Educational Documentation

In Reggio Emilia classrooms, educational documentation is the visible work of students and educators. Documentation played an integral part of the educational practices of Reggio Emilia philosophy (Bond, 2015; Istituzione of the Municipality of

Reggio Children, 2010). Documentation is created through photos, writings, observational notes, and project work of students and educators. In Reggio Emilia programs, documentation was typically put on display in classrooms or around the school to visibly show the process of the work of the children and educators (Reggio Children, 2010). One intention of documentation was to share the work from the classrooms with children, families, and educators (New, 1989). At times, documentation was also created as an invitation for further exploration for students (Istituizone of the Municipality of Reggio Children, 2010).

Organization of Time

The organization of time in Reggio Emilia early childhood programs in Italy varies from the organization of time in public schools in the United States. In Reggio Emilia classrooms, time was not measured by a clock, but was measured by observations of the children's interests and needs (Hendrick, 1997). The Italian value of time influenced how Reggio Emilia classrooms approached the daily schedule for students. In Reggio Emilia classrooms the value of time was slow, flexible, and allowed time for wait periods between projects and contrasted the expectations of time in many classrooms in the United States,

There was no struggle against the clock or an attempt to fit too many things into a small block of time. It was not a wall street office but a school for young children and that race with the clock simply not present. The hectic pressure to keep on schedule wasn't there. Things happened in their own time and space without the forced nature, a rushed schedule, or over-scheduling gives. (Wurm, 2005, pg.52)

The value of time in Reggio Emilia allowed for project-based learning as projects lasted for weeks, months, and even years (Edwards, Forman, & Gandini, 2012). As explained by Firlick, “Learning in Reggio takes on a more in-depth understanding of phenomenon because learning is not measured by time and coverage” (1995, p. 7). One of the values of the culture of Italy that transferred into the Reggio Emilia early childhood programs was the organization of time in classrooms.

Long-Term Investigations and Project Work

The main vehicle for learning in Reggio Emilia programs was through long-term investigations (the word used in Reggio Emilia) or projects (Edwards et al., 2012). Students interests were used to spur projects and were the main approach to learning in Reggio Emilia early childhood programs (McClow & Gillespie, 1998). Long-term investigations gave students opportunities to gain in-depth understanding on a specific topic through exploration, observation, conversations, questioning, hypothesizing, representing, theory building, and revisitation of ideas (Hewett, 2001). A study conducted in Sweden at Reggio Emilia inspired programs by Roth and Mansson (2011) described examples of projects that were pursued in Reggio Emilia classrooms that included light/dark and life/death. Projects were chosen to study in each Reggio Emilia classroom based on the observations, documentation, and conversations of the children by the educators in the classrooms (Hendrick, 1997).

Griebing conducted a 10-week ethnographic study that investigated the visual arts aspect of project work used in Reggio Emilia classrooms. The results of Griebing’s research displayed perceived benefits of a project-based approach to education that was

used in Reggio Emilia classrooms (2011). Benefits identified in students that attended Reggio Emilia classrooms in the United States included the ability to express themselves, mastery of a variety of skills, a strong sense of belonging, and increased generosity for others (2011). Using projects as the main avenue for learning ensured that there was no planned curriculum or standards that indicated what and when children would be learning. Malaguzzi explained that having set curriculum plans pushed the early childhood programs towards teaching without learning (Edwards et al., 2012). Therefore, in Reggio Emilia classrooms, long-term investigations were implemented with each project organically crafted uniquely to the individual students and educators in each classroom (Hewett, 2001).

Environment as the Third Teacher

In Reggio Emilia early childhood programs, classroom environments are created with careful intention. A brief explanation for how the early childhood programs viewed classroom environments was outlined by Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Children,

The interior and exterior spaces of the infant-toddler centers and preschools are designed and organized in interconnected forms that foster interaction, autonomy, explorations, curiosity, communication, and are offered as places for the children and for the adults to research and live together. (2010, p.13)

One way educators in Reggio Emilia programs create intentional classroom environments were that educators chose specific classroom materials that were open-ended to allow for creativity, critical thinking, and experimentation. Materials were

placed in Reggio Emilia classrooms with careful attention that appealed to students in aesthetically pleasing ways (New, 1989). One identified perceived benefit from parents for their children that attended a Reggio Emilia inspired program in Chicago, Illinois was that children were given freedom to explore open-ended classroom materials at will. Results for children in the case study from Smith displayed that because children were given the freedom to explore classroom materials, children learned how to self-manage their time with open-ended materials (2014).

Relationship Between Children, Educators, Families, and Community

Fostering and building relationships between families, children, educators in the school, and also within the city community was another tenet of Reggio Emilia philosophy. The creators of Reggio Emilia programs believed that children needed to feel and see the collaboration between their parents and educators to build trust in school environments (New, 1989). Reggio Emilia programs included parents in the planning and the development of learning projects. A collaborative spirit was fostered in Reggio Emilia programs through parent meetings, parent workdays, class celebrations, and daily communication between educator, children, and parents (New, 1989).

To find deeper understanding of parental perceptions for children who attended a Reggio Emilia inspired program, Smith conducted a case study and examined experiences of low-income parents in a Reggio Emilia inspired program in Chicago, Illinois (2014). Historically, progressive programs like Reggio Emilia inspired programs, have failed to serve low-income populations in the United States (Smith, 2014). Smith investigated what parents experienced after their children attended a Reggio Emilia

inspired program that served low-income families and examined parents understanding of the Reggio Emilia philosophical approach. Results showed that parents experienced positive impressions of Reggio Emilia philosophy for their children, developed strong relationships between educators and families, and acquired a basic understanding of the Reggio Emilia philosophical approach (Smith, 2014). To further understand parental choice and identified benefits for their children who attended a Reggio Emilia inspired preschool, McClow and Gillespie (1998) conducted a qualitative study in a Head Start preschool program that integrated the practices of Reggio Emilia into their program philosophy. The results indicated that parents were involved in their childrens educational experiences and wanted to know more about the implications of Reggio Emilia program philosophy (McClow & Gillespie, 1998). An integral foundation of Reggio Emilia philosophy was built on relationships between educators, families, and children within the larger community.

Perceived Benefits Associated with Reggio Emilia Programs

One goal of the current study was to investigate parental perceived benefits for choosing a Reggio Emilia inspired program for their children in the American Midwest. Identified benefits of children who attended Reggio Emilia programs included critical thinking and problem solving skills, acquisition of creative arts skills, positive inclusion practices of children of all ability levels, positive relationships with educators, and strong motivations to learn (Bond, 2015; Smith, 2014; Swann, 2008; Vakil et al., 2003; Zorec, 2015). The list of identified benefits will be included in detail in the next section.

Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving Skills

One benefit for students who attended Reggio Emilia programs included the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Griebeling, 2011; Kim & Darling, 2009). Kim and Darling (2009) investigated how four-year-old students at a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia inspired program in Canada interpreted learning experiences. When problems arose during a classroom project in a Reggio Emilia classroom, children collaborated, learned how to express their thoughts to one another, and gained multiple perspectives after hearing their peers differing ideas (Kim & Darling, 2009). Children worked together in small groups and discussed theories about the project and when conflicts came up between children, the educators supported children to discuss and solve problems together (Kim & Darling, 2009). The results from Kim and Darling indicated that in Reggio Emilia programs educators supported ideas of students and fostered problem-solving skills that resulted in strengthened social-emotional development, critical thinking skills, and multiple perspectives of others (2009). Similarly, results of Katz's qualitative study indicated that students in Reggio Emilia early childhood programs in Italy gained habits of curiosity, reflection, and awareness of others through the project-based approach to learning (1999).

Creative Arts Skills

In Reggio Emilia programs, creative arts are valued and fostered with the inclusion of ateliers and the philosophy of the *hundred languages of learning*. Educators and scholars have recognized the advanced artistic abilities of children at the original Reggio Emilia early childhood programs in Italy (Swann, 2008). Swann (2008)

investigated 12 preschool children, ages three and four years old, while they explored collage paper in a Reggio Emilia inspired classroom. Results of Swann's (2008) quasi-naturalistic study indicated that one benefit of children that attended a Reggio Emilia inspired program was the acquisition of self-expression skills they obtained through the opportunities of being creative.

A 10-week ethnographic study of 16 children (ages 3 to 6 years old) was conducted in a Reggio Emilia inspired preschool in the metropolitan Midwest in the United States and investigated the purposes of creating artwork within the context of project work (Griebing, 2011). Results of an ethnography by Griebing concluded that when educators provided children with access to creative arts materials, allowed children to choose what they wanted to create with, and provided basic information on how to use certain art tools children showed competence in the creation of purposeful art (2011). Griebing's research displayed that the value placed on creative arts in Reggio Emilia inspired classrooms was identified as a benefit for children who attended (2011).

Positive Inclusion Practices of All Children

The Italian early childhood programs in Reggio Emilia included children of various abilities in classrooms with their typically developing peers. One benefit parents identified for children that attended Reggio Emilia early childhood programs was the positive inclusion practices for children with disabilities. Children with special needs (the intentional term "special rights" used in classrooms in Reggio Emilia, Italy) regardless of ability level were included in all infant, toddler, and preschool classrooms in Reggio Emilia (Gilman, 2007; Schneider et al., 2014; Vakil et al., 2003). The educators of

Reggio Emilia programs in Italy believed that children with special rights benefited socially, emotionally, and cognitively when integrated into classrooms with their typically developing peers (Edwards et al., 2012). Results from Vakil et al. who examined inclusion practices of Reggio Emilia early childhood programs in Italy indicated that the family-centered practices that were implemented in Reggio Emilia programs helped to promote positive inclusion outcomes for children with special rights.

Relationship with Educators

Educators in Reggio Emilia programs worked alongside children as co-constructors in learning. One identified benefit for children who attended Reggio Emilia early childhood programs was that children were seen as capable and competent (Smith, 2014; Swann, 2008). Schneider et al., investigated school transitions for children from preschool to kindergarten in Reggio Emilia preschool programs in Italy (2014). Schneider et al. displayed one identified benefit of Reggio Emilia philosophy was the way educators focused on developing positive, nurturing, and loving relationships between educators and students which resulted in positive preschool experiences for the students. Reggio Emilia educators focused on supporting children socially and emotionally that resulted in positive school liking and fewer problem behaviors with students (Schneider et al.).

Motivation to Learn

A strong motivation to learn has been identified as 1 benefit of children who attended Reggio Emilia inspired programs. Reggio Emilia philosophy was intentionally designed to include students in their learning experiences. In Reggio Emilia programs, students interests were identified and built upon with the goal to support a strong desire

to learn in children (Edwards et al., 2012). McClow and Gillespie (1998) conducted a qualitative study with interviews and focus groups of parents whose children attended a Reggio Emilia inspired Head Start program in Iowa. Results of McClow and Gillespie's qualitative study showed one benefit parents identified after their children attended a Reggio Emilia inspired program was that the children acquired strong motivations to learning (McClow & Gillespie, 1998). One parent participant explained that after her son attended the Reggio Emilia inspired program, her child was motivated to learn because his interests were followed because educators created curriculum that was meaningful to him (McClow & Gillespie, 1998).

Reggio Emilia Inspired Programs in the United States

The Reggio Emilia philosophical approach to early childhood education has been studied and adapted in both private and public early childhood programs in the United States for years (Abdelfattah 2015; McClow & Gillespie, 1998; Swann, 2008). One of the problems American educators have faced was how to apply constructivist-based Reggio Emilia philosophy into classrooms in the United States (Hendrick, 1997; Mitchell et al., 2008; O'Donoghue, 2011). Over the years and with the popularity of Reggio Emilia philosophy in the United States, progress was made to implement the philosophy appropriately by American educators, yet there still remained lack of understanding for how to apply Reggio Emilia tenets into American classrooms (Abdelfattah 2015; O'Donoghue, 2011).

As programs in the United States have incorporated Reggio Emilia philosophy into classrooms, the cultural underpinnings of the Italian culture were sometimes

misunderstood from American educators (Firlick, 1995; Henderick, 1997). Although programs in the United States may find inspiration from Reggio Emilia early childhood programs in Italy, the philosophy will never be replicated identically in American classrooms because of the cultural values of Italy that are embedded into the philosophy. Vatalaro et al. (2015) conducted a phenomenology study of American college students who visited Reggio Emilia early childhood programs in Italy. Results of the study displayed participants recognition of cultural differences and norms between programs in Reggio Emilia and the cultural norms in the United States (Vatalaro et al.).

Educators played a significant role in the implementation of Reggio Emilia practices in American classrooms. Early childhood programs in the United States have adopted, implemented, and were inspired by Reggio Emilia programs in Italy since the 1980s (Abdelfattah 2015; Bond, 2015; Hewett, 2001; McClow & Gillespie, 1998; Swann, 2008). McClow and Gillespie reported that American educators have studied and adapted Reggio Emilia approach into early childhood programs, private preschools, and in Head Start programs for years in the United States (1998). A comparative case study examined one private and one public Reggio Emilia inspired preschools in San Francisco, California (Abdelfattah, 2015). Results indicated that educator perceptions of Reggio Emilia practices was the most powerful predictor for proper implementation of Reggio Emilia philosophy into American classrooms (Abdelfattah, 2015).

Mitchell, Foulger, Wetzel, and Rathkey conducted a single case study with one educator who integrated practices of project-based Reggio Emilia style learning into her American public school classroom (2009). Results indicated that the American public

school educator succeeded in following the main tenets of Reggio Emilia philosophy and was also able to meet state and federal standards in her classroom (Mitchell et al.).

Although there were barriers to integrating, implementing, and following Reggio Emilia inspired practices from Italy into American classrooms, research displayed it was possible (Abdelfattah, 2015; Mitchell et al.; Parnell, 2012).

Perceived Disadvantages of Reggio Emilia Inspired Programs in the United States

The purpose of the current study was to focus on perceived benefits of children who attended a Reggio Emilia inspired early childhood program in the American Midwest. To control for bias, it was important that disadvantages for using Reggio Emilia philosophy in the United States was also identified. Two studies with similar results indicated that it was difficult for educators in the United States to integrate the practices of Reggio Emilia philosophy into American classrooms (Abdelfattah, 2015; Elliott, 2005). The results of the studies from Abdelfattah (2015) and Elliott (2005) indicated that reasons for difficulty in the integration of Reggio Emilia practices included: an extreme requirement of labor intensive commitments from educators, changing from a teacher-directed practice to child-teacher centered practice, and adhering to standardized testing and state requirements. One educator participant in the research by Abdelfattah explained that because of district requirements put on children in kindergarten using Reggio Emilia philosophy in preschool while also meeting requirements of the state was not possible due to the slow, child-centered pace of the Reggio Emilia approach (Abdelfattah, 2015).

Another disadvantage identified by DeVries, Zan, Hildebrandt, Edmiaston, and Sales (2002) and Katz (1999) included American educators misunderstanding of the

meaning behind constructivist-based Reggio Emilia philosophy. Lack of understanding from educators resulted in too loosely structured classroom learning environments (DeVries, Zan, Hildebrandt, Edmiaston, & Sales, 2002; Katz, 1999). A third identified disadvantage for implementation of Reggio Emilia practices in American classrooms included educators and administrators misunderstanding how to integrate the theory of Reggio Emilia into actual classroom practices. Without a formal training, as in Montessori or High-Scope, staff struggled to learn how to follow Reggio Emilia philosophy in American classrooms (Abdelfattah, 2015; Henderick, 1997). Identified disadvantages from past research on Reggio Emilia approach were minimal in comparison to identified advantages of Reggio Emilia philosophy.

Explanation of Past Research Related to the Current Study

Researchers have explored various aspects of Reggio Emilia early childhood philosophy. Past research that were relevant to the current study were included in books, seminal works, dissertations, and research studies that are listed in the following section.

Seminal Works

The major seminal research that has been conducted on Reggio Emilia early childhood programs have included Firlick (1994, 1995); Gandini (1984, 2012); and New (1991, 1999, 1989). Literature from Firlick included information on Reggio Emilia philosophy from Italy and how the model has been adapted to programs in the United States. Gandini was the liaison between Reggio Emilia early childhood programs in Italy and the United States. Gandini wrote numerous books and journal articles on Reggio Emilia related topics. Gandini has been an active part developing and continuing the

relationship between Italian and American educators. New investigated the main tenets of Reggio Emilia philosophy and included strategies for using the Italian philosophy in America.

Studies with Similar Scope and Rationale for Research

The rationale for the selection of the current research topic was based on the gap in literature along with suggestions for future research given by authors of dissertations that were aligned with the current research focus, problem, and questions:

- Herrington (2014) conducted a quantitative study that examined parental choice for their children enrolled in early childhood programs in the United States. For future research, Herrington suggested continuing to conduct research in the field of early childhood education to promote awareness of the importance of high-quality programs to possibly result in more high-quality program options for families in the future. The results of Herrington's research concluded that more literature needed to be conducted on how specific program philosophies influenced high-quality early childhood experiences for children (2014). To support Herrington's suggestion, the current study investigated parental choice for choosing one early childhood program, the constructivist-based Reggio Emilia program over alternatives.
- Stowell (2014) investigated experiences of children who attended Reggio Emilia inspired kindergarten programs through an educational qualitative study. Stowell observed two Reggio Emilia inspired programs in the

United States, and focused on if an arts-based education was an effective learning model. From Stowell's study, future research was suggested to add more literature for stakeholders who are developing curriculum for kindergartens. The future research would seek to understand the benefits and effectiveness of an arts-based program such as Reggio Emilia versus curriculum that is developed for high-stakes testing that is "teaching to the test". My study investigated one aspect of Stowell's suggested future research and examined benefits of an arts-based Reggio Emilia inspired early childhood program. The intended results of my current study aligned with the suggestion from Stowell to add more literature for stakeholders to help understand benefits of an arts-based curriculum like Reggio Emilia.

- Andrews (2012) conducted a quantitative study that examined the effectiveness of kindergarten readiness skills that were acquired by students based on the preschool philosophical model that they attended. Reggio Emilia philosophy was 1 of the 3 preschool philosophical models selected. Andrews recommended future in-depth studies on each preschool curriculum model and my study followed Andrews recommendation that investigated the Reggio Emilia curriculum model more in-depth (2012).
- Mathis (2011) investigated experiences of using social constructivist Reggio Emilia philosophy in a state funded preschool program in California. Mathis used a qualitative research design and investigated how educators and administrators effectively used a Reggio Emilia social

constructivist-based preschool program in their school. From the results, Mathis (2011) suggested that early childhood leaders needed to advocate for developmentally appropriate practices and the recognition of a strong image of the child in all early childhood programs, as it is in Reggio Emilia programs. My anticipated contribution for the current study was to fulfill Mathis' suggestion and showed how Reggio Emilia early childhood programs can be developmentally appropriate for young children.

- Recchia and Bentley (2013) investigated parental perceptions for their children's preschool experiences after the children attended a play-based, child-centered program to understand benefits on the children's preparation for kindergarten. Similar to Recchia and Bentley, the current study examined benefits parents identified of their children's Reggio Emilia early childhood program experiences (2013).

Strengths and Weaknesses of Literature Related to the Research Problem

Researchers have not addressed the identical current research problem, but other researchers have explored similar topics that were related to the current research topic. One weakness found in past research approaches that investigated similar research topics was the lack of context explained of the philosophy of Reggio Emilia in their studies (Andrews, 2012; Smith 2014; Zorec, 2015). It was vital to give context to Reggio Emilia philosophy as the philosophy may be complex to understand and an explanation should have been included in all past research related to Reggio Emilia philosophy.

A second weakness in past research was that some researchers used a quantitative research design to investigate the similar research problem of the current study (Andrews, 2012; Herrington, 2014; Zorec, 2015). A qualitative design approach may have been more in line with what approach should have been used because qualitative design produced holistic results (Abdelfattah, 2015; Merz & Swim, 2011; Mitchell et al., 2009; Recchia and Bentley, 2013). One strength of McClow and Gillespie's approach was that they included parents as participants and used focus groups of parents as the data collection method and resulted in an investigation of the problem from a parental perspective (1998).

Studies with Phenomenological Approach

The phenomenological research design approach was selected for the current study because the intention of the research questions was to examine parental experiences for their children that attended a Reggio Emilia inspired program in the American Midwest. A phenomenology design fit the research questions best and supported examination on the deepest level. Reggio Emilia inspired programs are unique and in order for outsiders to understand how the program philosophy was implemented, a phenomenology design was necessary. Vatalaro et al. used a phenomenological research design that investigated lived experiences of five pre-service educator participants from the United States during a two-week study abroad program to the early childhood programs in Reggio Emilia, Italy (2015). Vatalaro et al. explained that the phenomenology research design was chosen for their study because it helped to deeply understand how participants experienced learning about Reggio Emilia program

philosophy. In-depth interviews were the main data collection tool that was used in order to gain insights into participants' experiences through the phenomenology (Vatalaro et al.). Similar to Vatalaro et al., the phenomenology research design was chosen for the current study to deeply uncover the experiences of parents who chose a Reggio Emilia inspired program in the American Midwest for their children. Vatalaro et al. used horizontalization as in my current study and highlighted significant statements that were relevant to participants experiences, identified significant statements that were clustered into common themes, and shared results that were compiled into a list of themes with detailed descriptions and quotes from participants.

A phenomenological study was conducted an investigation of the lived experiences of two masters students from Portland State University, in Oregon, who attended a study tour in Reggio Emilia, Italy (Parnell, 2012). The purpose of the study from Parnell was to record the shared lived experiences of students who attended a study tour in Reggio Emilia, Italy in order to share the experiences with other students who were unable to attend the tour. My choice of phenomenology research deisgn was similar to Parnell in that my purpose was to share lived experiences of parents who choose to send their child to a Reggio Emilia inspired early childhood program (2012).

Summary and Conclusions

Understanding the history of Reggio Emilia early childhood programs from Italy along with main tenets of the model gave context to the current study. Past studies have investigated benefits identified with children who have attended Reggio Emilia programs such as creative thinking and art skills and the value placed on relationships between

children, families, and educators (Elliott, 2005; McClow, Gillespie, 1998; Swann, 2008). Past studies have examined aspects of Reggio Emilia philosophy that included the investigation of main tenets of the approach such as viewing children as capable (Zorec, 2015). Investigations of how the Italian model of education was implemented into American classrooms have been explored (Abdelfattah 2015; Bond, 2015; Hewett, 2001; McClow & Gillespie, 1998; Swann, 2008). Past literature has been conducted on how relationships play a vital role in the Reggio Emilia philosophy (Schneider et al., 2014). Investigations of study tours in the Italian Reggio Emilia early childhood programs were investigated by researchers to understand the implications for educator professional development, to further understand the Reggio Emilia practices, and learn the cultural underpinnings of the philosophy (Parnell, 2012; Vatarlaro et al., 2015). Past research was conducted to understand why parents chose to send their children to one philosophical program over alternative options was investigated as well as research that investigated benefits associated with children that attended early childhood programs (Grogan, 2011; Hatcher et al., 2012; Recchia & Bentley, 2013; Smith, 2014). Yet, there remained a gap in literature that investigated experiences from parents who chose a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia inspired program for their children and examined perceived benefits for their children who attended.

To support the overarching problem of the current study, past studies were included that focused on the investigation of benefits for a constructivist-based learning approach versus a traditional learning approach. Mathis (2011) investigated the constructivist-based learning model and Recchia and Bentley (2013) investigated how a

play-based learning philosophy contributed to learning in a Reggio Emilia inspired programs. Questions remained unanswered in past research in terms of perceived benefits for constructivist-based Reggio Emilia programs in the United States. There appeared to be a limited amount of research conducted on how Reggio Emilia pedagogy was implemented into early childhood programs in the United States.

A minimal amount of research was conducted on the constructivist-based Reggio Emilia program and specifically that examined students who have attended a Reggio Emilia inspired programs in the United States with associated benefits for children who attended (Abdelfattah, 2015; Elliott, 2005; Swann, 2008). From my investigation, there appeared to be a lack of past studies that investigated parental choice and overall experiences for choosing a Reggio Emilia program over alternative programs for their children in the United States. The anticipated results of the current study attempted to fill the gap in the literature to find out from parents their overall lived experiences of a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia philosophy and how this type of program benefited their children (Apple, 2008; Brown, 2015). Chapter 3 will include a full description of how the gap in literature was investigated through a phenomenology research design specifically to find deeper understanding of experiences and perceived benefits from parents that chose a Reggio Emilia inspired program in the American Midwest for their children.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The current phenomenological study's purpose was to investigate parents' experiences who chose a Reggio Emilia inspired early childhood program for their children as well as associated benefits after their children attended a Reggio Emilia inspired program in the American Midwest. Chapter 3 will include the research method for the current study with details on the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, the methodology used, issues of trustworthiness, and a summary.

Research Design and Rationale

The following research questions provided direction to the current study:

1. What were the lived experiences of parents who chose to enroll their children in a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia inspired early childhood program?
2. What associated benefits did parents perceive were achieved by enrolling their child in Reggio Emilia inspired program?

A phenomenology research design was chosen for the current study because the intended outcomes fit best with a qualitative phenomenology research design. One alternative qualitative research design, the case study, was considered. However, the research goal of investigating the lived experiences of parents whose children attended a Reggio Emilia inspired program would not have been accomplished from the case study design because it would have lacked the depth that was intended to discover (see Creswell, 2013).

Role of the Researcher

As the sole researcher of the current study, I was responsible for all aspects of the study. The first step included meeting with the gatekeeper of the chosen collection site to learn more about the data collection site. Next, an evaluation and investigation of the chosen program was conducted if it was evident that the program had integrated Reggio Emilia philosophy into daily practice. After my visit, it was obvious that the program had integrated the main tenets of Reggio Emilia philosophy into their daily practice and Foundations Early Learning Center was chosen as the data collection site. The gatekeeper agreed to allow me to conduct research at Foundations Early Learning Center. The gatekeeper reached out to possible parent participants through e-mail and explained my study to them. Each parent who was interested in participating in my study was given an informed consent form through e-mail and my email address to contact me if interested. The parent participants were required to send back the informed consent form to me before I set up interviews with each parent.

Next, a list of questions to ask participants during interviews related to the 2 research questions were created. Individual interviews with parent participants were scheduled, conducted, and audio-recorded. All 5 parent participants agreed to audio-recorded interviews and audio files from the interviews were sent to an online transcription service to be transcribed. After transcriptions were received from me, each parent participant were given the opportunity to examine their individual transcriptions for accuracy. Each parent approved of the transcripts for accuracy and last the transcripts were analyzed and coded (see Maxwell, 2013; see Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014).

Incentives were not given to parents in an effort to gain participation in my study. My relationship with the gatekeeper, the director at the data collection site, was established for the purpose of the current study and we did not have a previous personal or professional relationship established before the data collection site was chosen.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

Selected participants for the current study were parents of children who attended a Reggio Emilia inspired early childhood program, Foundations Early Learning Center, in the American Midwest. Participants met certain criterion requirements and all parents experienced the exact phenomenon (see Creswell, 2013). A purposeful sampling strategy was used to select 5 to 10 parent participants who shared the same phenomenon of choosing to send their children to the data collection site, a Reggio Emilia inspired program in the American Midwest. The criteria for parent participants included selecting parents who chose to send their child to a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia inspired program, the Foundations Early Learning Center, and that one of their children had to be enrolled in the program for at least 6 months.

Purposeful sampling determined the choice of the data collection site. I researched the data collection site's website online and visited the data collection site to ensure there was evidence that the program integrated the theory of Reggio Emilia philosophy into daily classroom practice. Throughout my search to find a data collection site, I searched and toured 10 possible sites before I chose Foundations Early Learning Center. Many early childhood programs claimed to be Reggio Emilia inspired, yet after observations in

the programs it was evident that in daily practice main tenets of the Reggio Emilia philosophy were not being implemented into classroom practices. I chose the data collection site, Foundations Early Learning Center, by following the steps outlined below:

- A recommendation by Kaminsky, North American Reggio Emilia Alliance (NAREA) Exhibit Project Coordinator and Innovations Editor, was to choose an early childhood program that was “identified as a center that engaged in some form of study of the Reggio Emilia approach and their work has been influenced as a result.”
- I chose an early childhood program listed on the NAREA website because Reggio Emilia inspired programs that are listed on the website have been identified as following the Reggio Emilia program philosophy.
- A checklist of main tenets that were developed by Italian Reggio Emilia educators and were explained in an educational pamphlet named, “Indications Preschools and Infant-Toddler Centres of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia” (Istituizone of the Municipality of Reggio Children, 2010) was used to determine if the data collection site implemented the main tenets of Reggio Emilia philosophy into their program.
- The data collection site was chosen in a geographic location that had at least five other early childhood program options for parents to choose from within a 30-minute driving distance.

Sampling

An average sample size for a phenomenology research study is between three and 15 participants (Creswell, 2013). Out of 22 possible parent participants, five parents agreed to be a part of my study. For the current study, data gathered from five parent participants gave substantial number of participants that established validity and reached saturation (Maxwell, 2013). Parent participants were recruited through an invitation to participate letter that was e-mailed to all possible parent participants. The invitation to participate letter explained the details of my study and asked for participants to participate through agreeing to be interviewed at least once for a period between one and one and a half hours. All interviews were conducted at the data collection site at hours that were convenient for the parent, educators, and administration of Foundations Early Learning Center. Parents who did not agree to be a part of my study explained that it was too challenging for them to be a part of the study because they did not have the time. A sample that requires participation from parents of young children was difficult because of the already stressful load of responsibilities parents of young children have. Agreeing to be in a study that was voluntary was not feasible for many parents of young children.

Instrumentation

From the recommendations for phenomenology research, the 5 parent participants in the current study were sufficient to meet saturation. To ensure the data collected for my study was sufficient, the recommendation from Moustakas (1994) was followed and in-depth interviews were conducted with each parent participant. My data collection instrument for interviews with parents included my own interview questions. Interview

questions were designed with a combination of questions related to the research questions, kept the conversation moving in the right direction, and encouraged in-depth and detailed responses (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Relevant follow-up questions were asked to gain more information about participants answers and to give participants the ability to elaborate on their answers. Rubin and Rubin's guide was used and integrated specifically with their suggested responsive interviewing techniques in the creation of my interview questions (2012).

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Table 1

Data Collection Information

Data collection process	Sources for Instrument Development	Frequency	Duration	How Will Data be Recorded?	Follow-Up Plan
Data were collected through participant interviews at the data collection site by me	Moustakas, C. (1994). <i>Phenomenological Research Methods</i> . Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc. & Rubin, H.J. & Rubin, I.S. (2012). <i>Qualitative Interviewing</i> . (Third Edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.	1 Time per participant.	1-1.5 hours each.	Audio Recorder and Cell Phone.	After interviews, I had audio-files transcribed. I privately sent individual participants transcriptions from their interviews to give them the opportunity to find errors. Results of the current study will be shared with the families and staff at Foundations Early Learning Center after the dissertation will be approved.

All five participants exited the study with a short debrief and explanation of future expectations from participants. After 2 to 4 weeks, transcriptions of each parent interview were given to each parent and examined to ensure for accuracy. All participants approved of their transcribed interviews and follow-up interviews were not needed.

Data Analysis Plan

The first step in the data analysis plan for the current study was to have audio files of parent participant interviews transcribed. Each transcription included a full, accurate, word-for-word written summary of all questions and answers asked to participants for each audio-recorded interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). From the written transcripts, participant responses were read several times. Through reading the transcripts, significant statements were identified. Significant statements were then clustered into codes (Creswell, 2013; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). To generate meaning of the interviews, codes were examined and then grouped together with other codes that shared similar meanings. A textural and structural description was then written that described the essence of the phenomenon from the results of the participants interviews. The textural and structural descriptions were organized and compiled into results of the study by corresponding codes that answered to each appropriate research question (Miles et al., 2014; Moustakas, 1994). The results of the current study were shared in chapter 4 in the format of a story and organized in sections based on themes that emerged from the two research questions (Sutton & Austin, 2015). Quotes of participants' responses from the interviews were added in the story and provided insight into the lived experiences of the parents participants.

Data Analysis Computer Programs

A combination of the qualitative analysis program, Quirkos, and word processor, Microsoft Word, was used to analyze interview data for the current study. Quirkos is a software system that was created in 2013 that helps manage, sort, code, and understand data (Quirkos, 2018). Descriptive coding was used in the current study that assigned labels to data and summarized lines from the interviews into short words or phrases (Miles et al., 2014). To compliment coding analysis that was done with Quirkos Microsoft Word was also used. Microsoft Word was used to record basic demographic information of each participant with details about each interview such as when and where the interview was conducted was documented in Word. I recorded notes in a Microsoft Word document after each interview with possible improvements, thoughts, and any notes that were relevant.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Bracketing was used for the current study to control for my own personal researcher bias that helped me to become aware of assumptions I brought to my research through my personal experiences related to Reggio Emilia philosophy (see Moustaka, 1994). The bracketing or epoche process was intended to remove researcher bias from the research, “ In the epoche, we set aside our prejudgements, biases, and preconceived ideas about things” (Moustakas, 1994, pg. 85). To establish credibility and dependability as the primary researcher, my personal and professional information was documented and reflected on related to Reggio Emilia experiences that included: (Patton, 2015)

- Worked in Reggio Emilia inspired early childhood programs from 2004-2013, including the reputable Reggio Emilia inspired Google Children's Center in Mountain View, California.
- Lived in Torino, Italy for 1 and a half years.
- Attended The Hundred Languages of Children Wonder of Learning Exhibit from Reggio Emilia, Italy multiple times.
- NAREA member for 6 years.
- An advisory committee member for The Hundred Languages of Children- Wonder of Learning Exhibit in Ann Arbor, Michigan for the summer of 2017.
- Hosted and led workshops and presentations on various aspects of Reggio Emilia inspired philosophy for educators, parents, and community members.

Moustaka explained the importance of remaining unbiased in a phenomenology, “In phenomenological studies the investigator abstains from making suppositions, focuses on a specific topic freshly and naively, constructs a question or problem to guide the study, and derives findings that will provide the basis for future research and reflection” (1994, pg. 47). To add confirmability to the current study, perceived disadvantages associated with Reggio Emilia inspired programs in the United States were included in chapter two. The last strategy I used that contributed to dependability was through member checking. Member checking ensured that parent participants agreed that the information recorded during the interviews was accurate.

Transferability refers to the degree to which the results of a qualitative study can be generalized or transferred to other contexts or settings (Creswell, 2013). A rich description of the data collection site was included with a table of basic demographic information of each parent participant. Through the explanation of the context, setting, and participant information of the current study, future researchers will understand details of my study to ensure appropriateness of transferability to future research. In terms of confirmability, a reflexive journal with notes and memos was recorded during the whole data analysis process. The journal included my own thoughts and feelings from my perspective as the researcher after I conducted each interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I established Microsoft Word and included information on the process of my literature review with notes on each journal, book, or resource and also contributed to confirmability of the current study.

Ethical Procedures

Approval from the Internal Review Board (IRB) were given that ensured the current study was following ethical procedures during the research process (approval number 09-21-17-030528). Before the data collection process began written permission from each parent participant was obtained through an informed consent form (Creswell, 2013). An informed consent form was created in Microsoft Word for all parent participants that included an explanation of the right to participate or withdraw at any time, the purpose of the study, procedures that were used for collection of data, an explanation of confidentiality protection, known risks of participation in the study, expected benefits of participants, and a signature from all participants (Creswell, 2013).

All data was kept confidential between participants and myself. Pseudonyms were given to all parent participants to protect their identities.

Ethical concerns were addressed during the recruitment process. One ethical concern that was addressed in the current study was to build a relationship with the gatekeeper in order to gain her trust from me as the researcher (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Another ethical concern was to be respectful of participants. In the current study, parents time was respected because parents were given the ability to chose what time and day worked best to conduct their interviews. I also honored all promises made to participants and did not pressure on parents to participate (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Another ethical concern was to gain permission from participants to audio-record interviews. Before each interview, verbal permission from parent participants were given to audio-record.

Summary

Chapter 3 included an overview of the methodology for the current study with justification for why a phenomenology was the chosen research design. A detailed explanation of my role as the primary researcher was explained with an inclusion of how the current study was controlled for researcher bias. A participation selection logic with procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection details were also given. An explanation of the data collection instruments that were used during interviews were included. Issues of trustworthiness and ethical considerations were explained to give credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability for the current research. A data analysis plan was explained that aligned with the phenomenology approach to the study. In chapter 4, readers will be given an overview of results for the current research

study with information on the setting of the data collection site, demographics of parent participants, data collection and analysis methods, evidence of trustworthiness, results, and summary will be included.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The investigation of parents who chose a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia program for their children guided the current study. The first research question for the current study was designed to explore the lived experiences of parents who chose to enroll their children in a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia inspired early childhood program. The second research question was designed to find the associated benefits that parents perceived after they enrolled their children in a Reggio Emilia inspired program. The structure of Chapter 4 will include a brief description of the data collection site, demographics of parent participants, the process of data collection, the data analysis procedures, evidence of trustworthiness, results organized by their corresponding research questions, and a summary.

Setting

One challenge of the current study was to find a data collection site that was putting the theory of Reggio Emilia philosophy into daily practice. Reggio Emilia philosophy has been adapted from the infant, toddler, and preschool programs in Reggio Emilia, Italy. Although early childhood programs outside of Reggio Emilia, Italy may find inspiration from the original Reggio Emilia programs, there will never be a program outside of the original schools that are able to fully replicate the Italian programs. The cultural influence of Reggio Emilia philosophy is deep seeded in the Italian culture. Every Reggio Emilia inspired program has implemented the philosophy of Reggio Emilia in varying degrees (Abdelfattah, 2015; McClow & Gillespie, 1998).

The chosen data collection site was in the American Midwest and was a Reggio Emilia inspired early childhood program for 12 years. After I researched and toured over 10 possible data collection sites, Foundations Early Learning Center was chosen as the research site for the current study. It was evident through my observations of the school and classroom environments that Foundations Early Learning Center was committed to following Reggio Emilia philosophy. It was visible that Foundations Early Learning Center had integrated the main tenets of Reggio Emilia philosophy into the daily practices through my observations of the educators interactions with children, classroom environments, materials offered to students, documentation, and the overall evidence in the program.

Demographics

All participants in the study were parents of children who attended the same Reggio Emilia inspired early childhood program in the American Midwest, Foundations Early Learning Center, for at least 6 months. Pseudonyms were given to protect the real identities of participants and the data collection site. Participation was voluntary and was explained in the invitation to participate letter (see Appendix A) that was emailed to each possible parent participant. An informed consent form was required by each parent that wanted to participate and it was made clear in the consent form that participants could leave the study at any time. The participants in the study included parents of children who were all enrolled in the same preschool classroom at Reggio Emilia inspired early childhood program, Foundations Early Learning Center. There were a total of 5 parent participants who agreed to be in my study out of 22 possible participants. All 5

participants were White, female, and had obtained an education of a bachelor's degree.

Demographic information that was collected after the study indicated that all participants were married and had household incomes over \$100,000.

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Name	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Education Status	Number of Children	Household Income
1. Katy Smith	41	Female	White	Bachelor in Education	2	Over \$100,000
2. Jakie Marshall	36	Female	White	Bachelor	4	Over \$100,000
3. Katherine Johnson	47	Female	White	Bachelor	1	Over \$100,000
4. Sally Jones	32	Female	White	Bachelor in Education	2	Over \$100,000
5. Jenifer Michaels	37	Female	White	Bachelor	3	Over \$100,000

Note. Pseudonyms were given to each participant.

Data Collection

Data were collected from 5 parent participants that uncovered the chosen phenomenon and answered research questions through in-depth interviews. All in-depth interviews lasted between one and one and a half hours each. All interviews were held at the Foundations Early Learning Center in a private classroom or art studio. All interviews for five participants were conducted with each individual within a time frame of 2 weeks. The interviews were conducted one time per participant at a time of day that was convenient for both the participant and myself. Interviews were audio-recorded with permission from participants in two ways: an I-Phone and with an Olympus digital voice recorder.

Data Analysis

Specific methods suggested by Moustakas (1994) supported data analysis for the current phenomenological study. A modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method that Moustakas explained provided the most practical and useful approach for my study (Moustakas, 1994). All steps of the coding process for the current study were journaled and recorded to ensure validity. The first step in data analysis was to get audio files from participant interviews transcribed into transcription documents. A reputable online transcription service, transcribe.com, was used to transcribe parent interviews. Once the transcripts were completed from transcribe.com and they were received electronically, the transcripts were read and analyzed to check for grammatical errors and inaccuracy.

After transcripts were reviewed once, they were re-read with precodes and preliminary notes taken from me. Preliminary notes were taken to identify interesting points related to the research questions and precoded by identifying possible codes (see Saldana, 2016). After this process of precoding and note jotting in the transcript documents, a digital copy of the interviewed transcripts were uploaded into the qualitative data analysis program, Quirkos. In Quirkos, the interview transcripts were examined individually and codes were identified. In the Quirkos program, one bubble represented one identified code, category, or theme that emerged from transcripts of the parent interviews. The two research questions were used as guides to identify codes (see Saldana, 2016). First, I self-coded a list of codes that were salient or essence-capturing from transcripts. Next, categories were created that organized codes under similar ideas. Subcategories were also created that were related to content of categories but still needed

a section of their own. Codes were created based on relevant words or ideas within a chunk of text that explained the two research questions of the current study.

Inductive coded units were moved to larger representations of categories and themes through an evaluation process. Codes were evaluated to ensure that they were related to the two research questions. The research questions were used to examine lived experiences of parents who chose to enroll their child in a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia inspired program and perceived benefits that children acquired after enrollment in the Reggio Emilia program. Due to the depth of the research questions, a large number of codes emerged (see Saldana, 2016). The process of qualitative inquiry demands meticulous attention and deep reflection on patterns that emerge when coding (Saldana, 2016). For the current study, codes, and categories were refined and recoded multiple times. Second cycle coding and theoretical coding were implemented to rearrange, reclassify, and group code data into categories and themes that were different, new, or remained the same (see Lichtman, 2006). The process of later level coding included using my own sound judgement, reading between the lines, and identifying salient features of the raw data. The creation of themes from codes and categories required sorting codes into an order that corresponded with the research questions that represented a specific idea (Saldana, 2016).

A total of 1,411 codes were found from five parent interviews that lasted between one and one and a half hours in length. Out of all five parent participant transcribed interviews, there were a total of 97 quotes from Michaels, 193 from Johnson, 242 from Johns, 335 from Marshall, and 544 from Smith. There were 10 categories that emerged

and were organized into 34 subcategories. One category was Reggio Emilia philosophy with the subcategories of documentation, morning meeting, one hundred languages, community, and small groups. Lichtman (2006) projected that in qualitative educational research codes will be generated and organized into 15-20 categories that will be synthesized into five to seven major themes. Some of the significant codes that emerged in the current study included program, choice, education, Reggio Emilia, educator approach, materials, satisfaction, social-emotional, classroom environment, interactive, family, active, not traditional, process, learning, and children.

After the coding was finished, a textual description was compiled that described what participants in the study experienced with the phenomenon; this process of “textural description” described the lived experiences through verbatim examples from the parent interviews (see Moustakas, 1994). Data from parent interviews about how parents described their lived experiences were included in a structural description that reflected the setting and context in which the phenomenon was experienced. Significant verbatim quotes from parent participant interviews are included in the results that were relevant to the identified themes. An example of a verbatim quote that was included under theme two of Research Question 1 “informed decision through program tours” was from parent participant Smith: “Through our tour, just watching the way that the teachers were interacting with the kids and letting them kind of set the tone sparked my interest. I started to understand the philosophy behind Reggio Emilia.” Verbatim quotes are used to add credibility to the results.

All 5 parent participants shared similar lived experiences and identified similar beneficial aspects after their children attended a Reggio Emilia inspired program. Most parents confirmed similar results in a positive direction for their child who attended a Reggio Emilia inspired program. The one concern described from parent participant Johns was a concern she had for her daughter who had not yet learned how to write the letters in her name after being at Foundations Early Learning Center for 6 months. The underlying quality of this discrepant case from Johns was the expectation of hand-writing from educators in a Reggio Emilia inspired preschool program that differed from John's personal expectation. Out of 242 quotes total from Johns, there was one discrepant quote. The rest of the quotes from Johns showed favor for choosing Reggio Emilia philosophy for her child despite her one concern.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

A variety of measures were implemented in my study to ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of results.

Credibility and Transferability

One strategy that was implemented in the current study to ensure the credibility was member checking to check that the information from the interviews was accurate (see Creswell, 2013). Two weeks after 5 parent participant interviews were conducted, e-mailed transcriptions of the individual interviews were securely sent to each participant. All 5 participants reviewed the transcripts and verified that the transcripts were accurate. Validation of the credibility of interviewed transcripts was conducted with member checking. In the previous Setting and Demographics sections, detailed information about

the setting of the data collection site as well as comprehensive data on each parent participant was given with the intention that future researchers may transfer results of the current study to related future research.

Dependability and Confirmability

As described in Chapter 3, epoche was implemented as a strategy to create dependability in the current phenomenological research study (see Moustokas, 1994). A description of my own personal experiences and biases were controlled by reflection on the biases. The purpose of epoche was to attempt to temporarily suspend my personal biases, perspectives, and assumptions on the subject matter (Lin, 2013). To provide dependability and credibility, a journal entry was recorded after interviews were conducted with each parent participant. Through journals, results of the data collection process may be confirmed to contribute to confirmability of the current study.

Results

The findings of the current phenomenological study will be shared in the format of a story and organized in sections based on themes that emerged from the two research questions that guided the current study (see Sutton & Austin, 2015). The first research question of the current study was focused on the lived experiences of parents who chose a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia program for their children. Results from the first research question displayed that parents chose a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia inspired program after parents conducted their own research to find out what Reggio Emilia philosophy was. The second theme that emerged was that parents made an informed decision by touring Foundations Early Learning Center as well as alternative

program options. The third theme was that parents chose a Reggio Emilia inspired program based on an intrinsic feeling. Theme 4 that emerged from the current study was that parents purposely chose against a traditional, nonconstructivist-based approach to early childhood education. The final theme that emerged from Research Question 1 was that parents found satisfaction when they chose a Reggio Emilia inspired program over nonconstructivist based programs.

Ten core themes were developed that helped answer Research Question 2 on parents' identified benefits after their children attended a Reggio Emilia inspired program. The first benefit was that children were given opportunities daily to be creative. A second perceived benefit was the individualized care and learning that was given from the educators at the Reggio Emilia inspired program. A third associated benefit identified from parent participants was the Reggio Emilia approach to learning that was interest, inquiry, and project-based. Theme number 4 was that value that was placed on communication and documentation. The fifth theme identified the intentional classroom environment and choice of materials offered to the children. Another theme that emerged from the second research question was the unique approach educators in Reggio Emilia inspired classrooms had when they worked with children. Theme 7 was that children were viewed as capable. An eighth theme was the authentic relationships and focus on the social-emotional development in children at the Reggio Emilia inspired program. For Theme 9, parents identified that constructivist-based learning was an associated benefit at Foundations Early Learning Center. The final theme identified from parents was the

benefit their children acquired from being given nature and outside classroom experiences daily.

Themes Based on Research Question 1

Understanding the lived experiences of parents whose children attended a Reggio Emilia inspired program in the American Midwest, Foundations Early Learning Center, was the focus of the first research question. In the study, lived experiences describes the first-hand practices of the parent participants who were members of the same group of people that experienced the phenomenon (see Moustakas, 1994). The investigation of a group of parents who have chosen a nontraditional approach to preschool education for their children was the unique phenomenon explored. The results of the in-depth interviews helped to answer the first research question and was organized in five themes and described in detail in the following sections.

Theme 1: Research of Reggio Emilia Philosophy by Parents

One of the goals of the current study was to understand the process of parents who chose to enroll their children in a Reggio Emilia program over alternative programs. Results displayed that all five parent participants did not have prior knowledge of what Reggio Emilia philosophy was before they enrolled their child at Foundations Early Learning Center. Most participants conducted research to learn more about Reggio Emilia philosophy before they enrolled their child at Foundations Early Learning Center. Michaels, mother of three with one child currently enrolled in the preschool room at Foundations Early Learning Center explained,

I found a book at the library that explained everything about Reggio Emilia. The Foundations Early Learning Center's website does a good job in explaining it too. After my own research, before I started my son at Foundations, I had a pretty good idea of how things were theoretically going to run.

Another participant, Johnson, who was the mother of one son that was currently enrolled in the preschool at Foundations Early Learning Center described that she never knew anything about Reggio Emilia approach before she met two people while working who recommended a Reggio Emilia preschool for her son. Johnson explained how she made the choice and decided on a Reggio Emilia program, "I met a preschool teacher who worked at a Reggio Emilia pilot program and she recommended a Reggio Emilia early childhood program for my son. I'm like what is this Reggio. So, I went home and googled it". Like Johnson, Johns, whose four year old was currently enrolled in the preschool had a bachelors degree in education explained that when she first heard of Reggio Emilia she did not have any knowledge of what the philosophy was. Johns said, "When I first heard Reggio Emilia I was like, what does that mean. I was not quite sure. But, I knew it was good, I promise it is good." Johns further explained her experience in finding the Reggio Emilia inspired program,

After I toured the school, I went home and researched the philosophy and it sounded great. I mean, what sounds bad about Reggio Emilia? It was important for me to find a program that had a strong background in curriculum because I know with my degree that I did not want to put my kid just anywhere. It was

important for me to find something that had good reviews. All the reviews I read were really positive.

Smith, mother of two children with one daughter currently enrolled in the preschool at Foundations and her other child was currently enrolled in kindergarten and had attended Foundations for two years explained, “I really didn’t know about Reggio Emilia philosophy until I started reading about it. It just made sense. The more I watched, learned, and interacted with the teachers and the kids and everything, I really started to get it”.

Marshall, mother of four with one daughter currently enrolled in the preschool room at Foundations Early Learning Center, discussed her family’s decision to enroll after she researched what Reggio Emilia philosophy was,

That’s why we chose Foundations Early Learning Center over alternative programs because I didn’t know a lot about the Reggio method. But, the only things I knew was that it was nature based and it was child led. Reggio Emilia philosophy meant nothing to me when I first was looking. I had no idea what it meant, I had no idea it was even out there. Until I did a little bit of research and studied it. Just the nature and student-led learning was enough for me to choose to enroll my daughter there.

Theme 2: Informed Decision through Program Tours

All five participants toured alternative early childhood program options before they chose and enrolled their children at Foundations Early Learning Center. The alternative early childhood program approaches that parent participants toured included

Montessori, and traditional more structured, sit-down program approaches. Smith described her decision to choose Reggio Emilia inspired Foundations Early Learning Center after she observed the Reggio Emilia approach in action, “Through our tour, just watching the way that the teachers were interacting with the kids and letting them kind of set the tone sparked my interest. I started to understand the philosophy behind Reggio Emilia”. Smith told how she toured three alternative early childhood programs for her son before she chose Foundations Early Learning Center because of the intrinsic feeling she had,

We toured a private preschool that we enrolled our child in for a little while before we found out about and toured Foundations. We really liked the teachers at the private preschool, but I’m like, “This is just not the right fit.” Like circle time for a half an hour is a really long time and my husband and I both agreed that we needed something that was a little bit more flexible and easy-going and would just meet our son where he was. We took a tour of Foundations program and as soon as I walked through the door, I knew that this was it.

After Marshall attended an open house at Foundations Early Learning Center she compared what she experienced at alternative programs,

My number one reason for choosing this program was having my children be in a program that focused on nurturing and compassion. After going to the open house and hearing their students talking to each other stood out to me. When I toured other schools it wasn’t like that. The students that come from Foundations Early Learning Center seem to be more compassionate, more patient, and more

respectful. That was what I wanted to make sure that my daughter got out of her experience in an early childhood program.

Theme 3: Intrinsic Feeling for Choosing Reggio Emilia Program

Participants described that after they toured Foundations Early Learning Center, they chose the program based on an intrinsic feeling that they got at the Reggio Emilia inspired program. Marshall described the intrinsic feeling she got when she toured Foundations Early Learning Center, “We came to an open house and the staff was so helpful. We had lots of questions, but by the time we left we didn’t have a concern. We knew this was the place we were going to choose”. Johnson toured a Montessori program for her son and was interested, but after she toured Foundations Early Learning Center she explained,

I walked into Foundations Early Learning Center and I said “this is home”. This is it. Like just the overall feeling of it and you know this is the right thing to do. And I really did not have a lot of knowledge about what Reggio Emilia was. When I went to the Montessori school, it felt a little colder kind of and I know it’s kind of a similar philosophy, but it just seemed cold to me. Where this seems like so loving and nurturing.

Johns also described the positive feeling she got when she entered the Reggio Emilia inspired program, “I mean I got a really good warm and fuzzy feeling the second I walked in”. Smith acknowledged that she chose Foundations Early Learning Center for her child because of the intrinsic feeling she got after she visited the program,

I am kind of one of those people who just have an intuition about things. My husband and I toured several different programs. We took a tour of Foundations Early Learning Center and as soon as I walked through the door I knew that this was it.

Theme 4: Chose Against a Non-Constructivist-Based Approach

Some participants described that despite societal pressures to choose a more traditional, non-constructivist approach to early childhood education for their children participants found more value in choosing the alternative constructivist-based Reggio Emilia approach. Michaels explained why she chose the Reggio Emilia's approach to learning over a more traditional, academic-based program,

The other programs we toured seemed really into the academic portion. The children need to know their numbers, their letters, how to write their names before they're out of the program all at three and four years old. I don't really think that's a necessity or should be the focus. I like that at Foundations Early Learning Center they're focused more on teaching the kids to be curious and how to find the answers to questions.

Johnson explained that she felt the pressure from society to choose an academically focused early childhood program for her child. Despite the pressure, Johnson chose a Reggio Emilia program over a traditional option,

I think that's what I was really drawn to was the whole idea that it's not worksheets, like that was very important to me. I think that just a traditional worksheet is not how my son is going to process learning. It was kind of a leap of

faith because it goes against a lot of what society wants to tell us about how children should be learning. I think every child needs the Reggio Emilia form of learning.

Johns purposely chose against the traditional, academic, teacher-directed approach for her child as well,

Specifically for my child, the traditional program approach wouldn't have worked. My daughter doesn't sit still. She's on the go constantly. So, I can't even imagine her sitting at a desk with like a pencil in her hand and being like, "What are we doing today?" If my daughter had been handed a worksheet every day, she would expect that every day. At Foundations Early Learning Center, it's different every day. I feel like here compared to a traditional program, it's so individual based. The teachers at Foundations Early Learning Center are focused on individual care within the group, which I don't think it would be like in a traditional classroom.

Marshall described how she purposefully chose the constructivist-based Reggio Emilia program over a traditional, non-constructivist program for her child,

There are so many preschool options and the main reason we chose this program is because my daughter does not like structure, like a classic Montessori or a traditional preschool. She's not going to sit and do stuff she is told to do and that would get her bored very easily. Worrying about what the children are going to be doing all day. Having them cramped inside, just doing stuff they are going to be doing in elementary school didn't appeal to me.

Smith described her decision to choose a Reggio Emilia inspired program over an academic style program for her two children,

I think that for my daughter that real structured and rigid thing would've been too hard. Learning through the children's natural abilities and giving children opportunities to explore topics is one of the reasons why we choose this Reggio Emilia program. If my children would have been enrolled in a real traditional space, I don't know that they would ever have that opportunity to do that.

Looking ahead to when my daughter goes to kindergarten, I'm really nervous because my daughter needs that extra patience. Sometimes she needs that extra time and there isn't that extra time in public schools. There isn't that extra patience in a normal, standard, state-based program. The children are expected to do certain things, and do it right now, and do it quickly because the educators have to keep up with what the state and government said they have to.

Theme 5: Satisfaction for Choosing a Reggio Emilia Program over Alternatives

All five parent participants had a child who attended Foundations Early Learning Center for a minimum of six months. Johnson, whose son had been in the program for a little over two years, shared her satisfaction for choosing the Reggio Emilia inspired program that included everything from the director, the educators, and the approach to learning,

I'm just really pleased. I really feel like if we would have gone down the traditional route it would have crushed his spirit right away. If he was at a

traditional school I'm guessing he would kind of be turned off by education and by the learning process.

Smith also described her satisfaction with constructivist-based Reggio Emilia approach, "My children are two of the dirtiest children at Foundations Early Learning Center. We love it. I would bathe them a million times for them to have those experiences that they offer through this Reggio Emilia program". Johns explained her satisfaction for choosing the constructivist-based Reggio Emilia philosophy for her child, "I'm very satisfied. At Foundations Early Learning Center it's different every day. I feel like compared to a traditional program, it's so individual based. It's what my child needs specifically for that day. I love it here. I am so happy". Marshall described why she chose a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia philosophy over a traditional academic-focused preschool for her child,

The A's will come in time. I think that's part of the philosophy, right? Is to give them time and space and trust. The kindness, the compassion, the relationship skills, working with all your peers, and not singling out other children is so important. I don't see it in the other schools as much as they focus on it at Foundations Early Learning Center. Hopefully, she'll be in a position when she leaves here, that she'll be able to stand up for people. Not just herself but for others and even outside of school. When she becomes an adult and she needs to function in society, have pride, have success, and when her fellow peers have success she will be happy for them. That's going to be important. That's what's important, not the grades.

One of Smith's children attended Foundations Early Learning Center for two years and was currently enrolled in kindergarten at the time of the interview (while her daughter was currently enrolled in the preschool program at Foundations Early Learning Center). Smith described the satisfaction and benefits for choosing the Reggio Emilia inspired preschool program for her children,

It just helped my son, who is in kindergarten now, develop more. It gave him another way of looking at things. It kind of expanded what we already saw in him. He was already real inquisitive and stuff, but I think it gave him much more space to explore. I think that he may have been a little bit more reserved if he did not attend this program. He might not have been as willing to take risks and stuff like that. I think that's definitely helping him in kindergarten now. If he would have started in kindergarten and not attended Foundations Early Learning Center he would have been a real follower. He would've done everything that he was told and I don't think that he would have ever wanted to learn more. His kindergarten teacher says, "He wants to know. He asks and he explores and learns and he is asking the other kids in his class really tough questions to promote their learning". The Reggio Emilia program takes the thing that my kids already have internally and intrinsically and then gives them space and an opportunity to build and explore. If my children would have been in a real traditional space, I don't know that they would ever have that opportunity to do that. I mean we love this place and these women and these kids so much.

Themes Based on Research Question 2

Research question two investigated what parents felt their children gained from being enrolled in a constructivist-based, Reggio Emilia inspired program in the American Midwest. To give context to the current study, the term *benefit* in Reggio Emilia programs in Italy would typically contrast the term *benefit* in traditional early childhood programs in the United States. Benefits identified by parents in traditional early childhood programs in the United States typically would include if their children learned their ABC's, started to read, or knew their numbers one-20. Expectations of traditional early childhood programs in the United States contrasted expectations of educators in Reggio Emilia programs in Italy. Educators in Reggio Emilia programs typically focused on how children developed critical thinking and problem solving skills, built positive relationships with others, and investigated and inquired topics of interest (Edwards et al., 2012).

Typical associated benefits of children that attended Reggio Emilia programs that parents identified were various holistic benefits because educators valued the children's abilities, listened to their ideas, and gave children opportunities to articulate their theories (Fyfe, 2011). In the Italian Reggio Emilia programs, educators would most likely choose the word *value* over the word *benefit* to describe what was achieved from their children after they attended a Reggio Emilia program. For the current study, I intentionally chose to use the word *benefit* with the acknowledgment that although programs in Reggio Emilia may not choose to use this term, I used *benefit* with the intention to gather data from parent participants as they would be more familiar with this term. Results of the

current study displayed that parents indicated associated benefits for their children in holistic terms, that aligned with the values of Reggio Emilia philosophy. Ten main themes emerged from results of the parent participants interviews that answered research question two and were described in detail in the next section.

Theme 1: Access to Creative Opportunities

One aspect of Reggio Emilia philosophy that was identified as a perceived benefit from parent participants was the value educators in the Reggio Emilia inspired program placed on providing opportunities for their children to be creative. Michaels explained creative experiences her child had at Foundations Early Learning Center, “It’s not preconstructed like “you’re gonna do a pumpkin today” type of thing. The children can kind of be creative in their own way. There’s a lot of opportunity for that”. Johnson agreed with Michaels that one benefit of her son after he attended the Reggio Emilia inspired program was the focus on creative learning, “I feel like there is so much creative learning and like a whole other side of my son is coming out that maybe wouldn’t have in a traditional setting”. The one hundred languages of children was a term that Reggio Emilia infant, toddler, and preschool programs in Italy were founded on. Smith explained the integration of the one hundred languages in many aspects of learning at Foundations Early Learning Center,

My daughter is making mud-pies, there’s music playing almost every morning when we come in, and there are dance parties. The children can swing while they paint on a big piece of paper on the ground. They take bottles of paint and they let the kids swing and paint. There are a lot of creative outlets for the children.

Marshall identified the access to creative opportunities as a benefit and one identified favorite experience of her daughter's,

My daughter loves everything at Foundations Early Learning Center and she's very artistic. My daughter loves when the educators put stuff on the projector for the children to explore. Through these type of creative arts experiences the children are learning a lot of different aspects of art, which is totally non-existent anymore in public schools.

In the Italian Reggio Emilia early childhood programs, the inclusion of an atelier is a significant part of the children's daily lives (Gandini et al., 2005). Smith described a studio space in one of the rooms at Foundations Early Learning Center, "They have one room inside the school that has become the studio space. A teacher will bring some kids in there and they will do self-portraits or constructive play or other creative project work". Marshall also described the inclusion of the art studio at Foundations Early Learning Center,

They have an art studio. It is outside and it's like a complete art studio. They use paint and any type of material to do with art. There is everything there, any type of material you can think of. They give the children the materials and let them do what they want with it. The children move through the process and create what they want. Whatever the children are thinking about or have an idea about. So there is a lot of learning about different aspects of art.

Theme 2: Individualized Care and Learning

One aspect of Reggio Emilia inspired programs that parents identified as one associated benefit was the attention educators took to individualize care and learning for each child. The educators in Reggio Emilia programs tailored learning by setting individual goals for each child. Marshall explained how the individualized care was implemented at Foundations Early Learning Center, “The teachers have expectations, but they are different for every student. They make individualized goals for each student. The teachers make sure every child is taken care of and is progressing on their individualized goals”. One identified benefit from Johns of the Reggio Emilia inspired program was the individualized care given from the educators, “It’s more in-depth. It’s more taking my child as an individual and not just as a group”. Smith discussed how the educators at Foundations Early Learning Center gave her daughter the extra time and patience that she needed,

I’m really nervous for my daughter to go to public kindergarten because she needs that extra patience that the teachers give to her at Foundations Early Learning Center. To really explore, to really learn, to have someone sit there with her and work through issues and conflicts. It is going to be really a struggle for her I think in public school because she will be expected to do these things really fast. In the Reggio Emilia program, she has the opportunity to take her time.

Johnson explained how educators at Foundations Early Learning Center were attentive to the individual needs of her son,

The educators at Foundations Early Learning Center picked up on sensory issues in my son. I think if he was in a normal program, he would have probably been labeled a behavior problem from an early age. Having their knowledge at Foundations Early Learning Center has been amazing.

Marshall had a similar experience as Johnson. Marshall's daughter, the youngest of four, had limited speech when she started in the preschool classroom at Foundations Early Learning Center. Marshall appreciated the approach from the educators at Foundations that focused on supporting the individual needs of her child,

When my daughter first started, she was not speaking for herself and the teachers recommended that we go talk to her doctor about it. The teachers observed that my daughter was getting upset because she couldn't talk with the kids when they were trying to talk with her. The teachers explained that we want to build her self-esteem by helping her with her speech. The teachers were worried about her as a whole person. If we went to another preschool, I don't know if they would have been so helpful in that aspect or if they would know where to go for support. The teachers at Foundations Early Learning Center really wanted to help so we got her assessed and she started in speech class. The teachers at Foundations Early Learning Center wanted to know what my daughter was doing in speech class, so that way they could help and do it here to support her.

Theme 3: Interest, Inquiry, and Project-Based Learning

The learning approaches implemented in Reggio Emilia inspired Foundations Early Learning Center were interest, inquiry, and project-based. Johnson described one

identified benefit of her child after she attended the Reggio Emilia inspired program at Foundations Early Learning Center was how curriculum was constructed based on individual interests and inquires of the children in the classroom,

The approach to learning is child-directed. I think it's amazing when the kids will grab onto an idea and the educators take it as far as they possibly can. That's amazing to me. I think it is amazing for the teachers and that's a lot more work than just handing out a worksheet.

Michaels agreed with Johnson because the curriculum in the Reggio Emilia inspired program was not repeated, theme-based, or generic. Instead, it was carefully designed based on the individual students in the classrooms, "It is not curriculum that they use every single year for every kid that comes through". Marshall explained that the way the educators involved students in the creation of curriculum in the Reggio Emilia program was another associated benefit, "The children come up with some of the ideas and there's not a set we have to get this done today curriculum". Johns also pointed out that Reggio Emilia approach to education was a associated benefit, "In my mind when you say Reggio Emilia all I think is that it is impressive. The way that they work with my child is different than a standard curriculum".

Smith described how educators in the Reggio Emilia inspired program supported her daughter's learning through an interest and project-based approach,

The teachers let the children start the process. Once the process has started there is so much opportunity to build upon that. For an example, my daughter is interested in the babies. So the teachers start with that and then they ask, "How do

we take care of babies?” Then you start to get those other real-life lessons that are brought into the theme from the teacher. Now the baby needs to be changed so let’s make a chart to record when the baby need to be changed. So then they’re getting charting skills and writing skills. It’s a natural way for the teachers to move with the natural progression as to what’s next in the children’s development. For me, the biggest part is that the teachers start where the children are and then expand from there.

Reggio Emilia programs followed children’s interests and tailored learning to the individuals in the classrooms. Johns identified one associated benefit of her daughter after she attended the Reggio Emilia inspired program was how Foundations Early Learning Center followed a project-based approach to learning, “The approach at Foundation’s Early Learning Center is more interest-based. And it is project-based. It is more authentic the way teachers do curriculum here rather than just to give students something out of the binder”.

Smith explained the benefit she found in project-based learning as in Reggio Emilia, even with her education and background in public education. Smith found deep value in a project-based approach to learning for her children at Foundations Early Learning Center,

The Reggio Emilia program does project-based things that are really interesting to the kids because it’s something they can relate to. It’s letting the children explore and be who they are and expand on their interests. It’s not just “here’s a piece of paper”. Coming from public education that is hard for me to say, but it is true. So,

it is starting where the children are and then expanding from there. They are doing a house project currently in the preschool room. The teachers asked parents to turn in pictures of everyone's home and brought them in the classroom to share. They talked about what a home is and what to do in a home and what the rooms are in a home. That's a really big project-based thing that they've done this year that is really interesting to the kids because it's something they can relate to.

Part of project-based learning was giving children the opportunity to think critically about a topic. One associated benefit identified by Johns was the critical thinking skills that increased in her daughter since her daughter started to attend Foundations Early Learning Center,

There's a lot of critical thinking in my daughter's mind that I see when she's at home and building or doing whatever she's doing now. She'll stop and she'll think, "what happens if I take this block out or what happens if I add a new block"? I know it is 100% what they are doing at Foundations Early Learning Center. I can see that there is a lot of critical thinking happening in the classrooms.

Theme 4: Communication and Making Learning Visible through Documentation

Documentation was viewed as a vital part of communication with families, children, and the school community in Reggio Emilia programs. Educators documented educational work to reflect on the interests, projects, and daily happenings of the individual classrooms. Documentation also communicated to children the value of what they do and brought awareness to the parents and public of the children's experiences in

the classrooms (Gandini & Edwards, 2001). One way Foundations Early Learning Centers communicated daily experiences in the classroom through documentation was with daily learning stories. Learning stories at Foundations Early Learning Center provided daily documentation through text and pictures that were sent electronically to parents that described specific details of what individual classrooms were engaged in each day. Johnson explained one benefit of the Reggio Emilia inspired program was the daily documentation of the learning stories that parents were given, “Every single day you get documentation. The learning stories they send home are great with pictures and quotes from kids. It is wonderful.” Johns also identified that daily documentation was a benefit of the Reggio Emilia inspired program,

We get those sweet letters at the end of each day and it says what they did each day. I love it so that way when she does come home we can talk specifically about what she did that day. That was another thing, a lot of those other programs didn't offer that.

Marshall also identified daily documentation and communication that the parents received from staff as an associated benefit of the Reggio Emilia inspired program,

I really like the fact that I get the daily learning stories. We get the daily letters, the weekly newsletters, we have our conferences, and we always are able to have time every morning and every pickup to also discuss anything with the teachers. It's not just go to pick up your kid, sign out, and you're done. I think one thing that's huge is the communication from the teachers to the parents. Through the daily learning stories, every day I know exactly what my child did that day. Was

she sad? Was she upset? They reach out to me all the time with that constant feedback.

One form of documentation and communication to parents from educators that was common in Reggio Emilia programs in Italy was a portfolio (or named diary in Reggio Emilia, Italy) that was created for each child that described the individual child's interests, progressions, and involvements (Edwards & Rinaldi, 2008). Educators at Foundations Early Learning Center followed the Reggio Emilia model to create portfolios that documented and analyzed each child's goals, strengths, and learning throughout the year. The implementation of portfolios at Foundations Early Learning Center was identified from parents as an associated benefit. Johnson explained her satisfaction with the portfolios at Foundations Early Learning Center, "I think that the portfolios are amazing. It's a ton of work for the teachers and I can't think of another program that does something similar. It just shows all the love that is put into the approach to teaching." Jackie described the portfolio process and how they were used as a form of documentation of the children's learning throughout the year,

The portfolios are constantly being changed out and added to. I'm so looking forward to graduation because when they graduate the children are given the portfolio as a graduation present. Inside the portfolio includes all learning stories that are printed out for your child and all of the children's saved artwork. It shows the child's strengths and all that they've worked on throughout their time at Foundations Early Learning Center.

Theme 5: Classroom Environment and Choice of Materials

In Reggio Emilia programs, educators created classroom environments with the intentional choice of materials, aesthetics, and space arrangements that were unique to the Reggio Emilia philosophy. From parent participants, the intentional classroom environment and choice of materials were identified as one associated benefit of their children after they attended the Reggio Emilia inspired program. Johns described the influence aesthetics of the classroom environment had on her decision-making process to choose Foundations Early Learning Center, “I loved the preschool classroom. I remember walking in and they had things hanging from the ceiling. It looked like a magical place. It felt like a really good space. It just was different from the other schools”. Smith described the typical set up of the classroom at Foundations Early Learning Center, “There are various activities set up around the room. The teachers let the kids just kind of do their thing and then they guide the children’s learning”. Smith also described the arrangement of the classroom experiences were set up in a free-flow manner, “They are in small groups just because they naturally end up that way. The students are usually in two or threes. The way that the classroom is set up is that there are different sections or areas for the children to explore. The children kind of rotate into different areas or add to something they were working on the previous day”.

Part of the Reggio Emilia philosophy is that materials are offered to children intentionally and purposefully. Typical materials found in Reggio Emilia classrooms include natural and recycled materials that are open-ended such as metal rings, flower petals, blocks, pinecones, seashells, and clay (Bond, 2015; New, 1989). Marshall

identified the selection of purposeful materials offered to children at Foundations Early Learning Center as one associated benefit, “There are different materials that the children can use in play that are unique. Materials such as natural materials and materials specific to projects the children are doing. They bring in sand and rocks and pumpkins.” Marshall described how educators in the Reggio Emilia inspired program offered materials as part of the classroom environment,

The teachers purposely put things out in the classroom to get the children to ask questions. There’s always something different based on the interests of the children. The teachers give children time to play, explore, test, and see what the materials are before telling them how to use it.

One benefit identified by parent participants was the selection and offering of unique materials in the Reggio Emilia inspired classroom environment that would not commonly be found in alternative preschool programs. Natural materials are an intentional material that was chosen in Reggio Emilia programs to support open-ended learning that appealed to the children’s senses. Johnson explained, “I think it is really cool because of the natural materials they use. It is not like you go to the playground and see big plastic play items. They use natural wooden logs and blocks in the classroom”. Marshall described materials that were offered at Foundations Early Learning Center that supported creativity in the classrooms, “The children have opportunities to build and be creative. There is usually specific materials that they offer on certain days like play dough or clay maybe paired with blocks. The materials are open-ended but the children

naturally end up being creative with them.” Smith described how the chosen materials offered by the educators supported projects that the children were studying,

With the whole “house project” this week, the students made their own play-dough and made their own houses with it. They were using blocks and the play-dough together to make mortar and houses. Through these materials, the children understand how blocks go together and how bricks have to be to get poured on the foundation for a home.

Theme 6: Educators Approach to Teaching

Educators in Reggio Emilia programs approach teaching differently than in a traditional, teacher-directed preschool program. Smith described the approach educators used in Foundations Early Learning Center classrooms as an associated benefit of the Reggio Emilia inspired program, “The teachers kind of guide the children’s learning and interact, but not always. It is not, “do this, do this, do this” from the teachers. I see the teachers more as facilitators of learning instead of directors”. Smith further described the approach educators used with students at the Reggio Emilia inspired program,

During our tour, just watching the way the teachers were interacting with the kids and letting them kind of set the tone at Foundations Early Learning Center was really what sparked my interest. I started to see more and started to understand the philosophy behind Reggio Emilia. When we took a tour of the school, everybody was doing their own thing. I could see the kids engaged in a lot of different play. The teachers were guiding the children, but letting them explore and I was like “this is it”.

Johns also agreed with Smith that a main benefit of her child being enrolled in the Reggio Emilia inspired program was how educators approached working with the students, “The approach that the teachers used with the students was phenomenal and 100 percent amazing. My daughter loves her teachers. She talks about her teachers all the time”. Marshall also identified one associated benefit as how Reggio Emilia educators worked with students to support their learning,

The children are always learning something new and are very inquisitive. The teachers are so open to seeing what the children are thinking and are trying to bring it out of them. The teachers let the students do what they are doing and leave it in the children’s hands. The way the teachers interact with the kids is different. Having that different tone sets my daughter’s day in a positive way.

One aspect of teaching in Reggio Emilia programs is the value placed on continuing education and professional development of the staff. All five parent participants acknowledged that the educators at the Reggio Emilia inspired program were committed to professional development opportunities. Johnson said, “It seems like the teachers are always going to continuing education courses and they post about it on their Facebook page”. Marshall also acknowledged the value placed on continuing education for educators at the Reggio Emilia inspired program,

The teachers tell us if there is a conference or if one of their teachers attended a conference. Then the teachers bring the extra knowledge back here and they share that information with the staff. They visit some of the sister type programs to try to get with other Reggio Emilia inspired schools.

Theme 7: Viewing Children as Capable

One of the overarching values of Reggio Emilia practice is how educators viewed children as capable with profound respect given to each child. Parent participants identified one associated benefit of their children enrolled at Foundations Early Learning Reggio Emilia inspired program for how educators viewed their children as capable. Smith identified the way educators spoke with children at Foundations Early Learning Center showed that the educators viewed children as capable, “Teachers speak with children in the most respectful way”. Johns also acknowledged a benefit of educators speaking with children as one way they view children as capable, “I feel like they talk to the children like they are adults and it works. I think that’s huge”. Marshall identified the way educators at Foundations Early Learning Center talked to students as a positive benefit of the program,

One of the other reasons why I truly enjoy my daughter being at Foundations Early Learning Center is the teachers have a different approach to talking to the kids. It is so calming and gentle. A compassionate, gentle, and caring way when talking to the kids. When children do things like take things away from each other or hurt their friend, the teachers have such a different way of talking to them. It is so encouraging to know that this is how your child is being talked to when you can’t be there. There’s no yelling, no stern talk, and no you can’t do that. It is different, definitely different from the other schools. It makes such a big difference and I love the way that they talk to the kids.

One aspect of Reggio Emilia philosophy that was part of the day to day practice at Foundations Early Learning Center was the educators trusted children in their physical capabilities and gave children opportunities to take risks. Smith recognized the benefit of children being given opportunities to take physical risks, “The teachers explain why it is important to take risks. When your child jumps off that rock it will help them to be more brave and not be afraid to try something new”. Marshall agreed with Smith and recalled her observation of how educators at Foundations Early Learning Center promoted physical capabilities,

Even the infants and the toddlers that can or cannot walk yet are given opportunities to climb trees. At other schools, the teachers would not allow children to do that but, the children need to. The teachers encouraged even the younger children to do things that most wouldn’t believe they could. The teachers get the children to push themselves.

Another way that children were viewed as capable in Reggio Emilia classrooms at Foundations Early Learning Center was that children were given opportunities to solve problems independently. Johnson explained how educators promoted positive problem solving between peers, “The teachers really take the time to let the children try to work things out, but then the teachers are there to help guide if they need it. The teachers are teaching them how to be a good friend and to think about others”. An example from Smith on how educators gave children opportunities to solve problems in a guided manner,

I love some phrases the teachers use with the children like, “What’s your plan for that?” or “How are you moving your body? Is that safe?” It makes the children stop and pause. I hear a lot of guided questions from the teachers, “How could we?” or “What should we do”? The teachers do not focus on the problem, but they focus on the solution.

Theme 8: Authentic Relationships and Social-Emotional Development

A significant part of Reggio Emilia philosophy is the value placed on building positive and authentic relationships between educators, families, and children. Parent participants identified the value placed on building authentic relationships and supporting social-emotional development in children as one associated benefit of the Reggio Emilia inspired program. One aspect of Foundations Early Learning Center that parents identified influenced the decision to choose a Reggio Emilia inspired program over alternatives was the authenticity from the staff to their children. Johns toured three alternative programs for her daughter, but chose the Reggio Emilia inspired Foundations Early Learning Center because of the authentic relationships formed between staff and children,

We looked at a few schools, but this program just stuck out to me. This is the first one we looked at, but I always went back to the first day here. How the director was with our daughter was so special because she down and did a puzzle with her. No one else did that. At Foundations Early Learning Center there was real interaction with the staff with my child in front of me.

Smith's son was currently in kindergarten during the time of the interview who previously attended Foundations for two years. Smith described her family's positive experience with the authentic relationships that were formed with the staff at Foundations Early Learning Center,

My son still has those relationships with his teachers at Foundations Early Learning Center even after going to kindergarten. This place has just changed our family. I mean we love this place and these women and these kids so much. Now with my daughter in preschool, I know that leaving Foundations Early Learning Center is going to be probably one of the hardest things I'll ever have to do in my life.

Marshall explained one benefit for her daughter being enrolled at a Reggio Emilia inspired program was the value the program placed on building social relationships for children,

My daughter has completely developed self-confidence from coming here. She's got the social skills now and has blossomed. I wanted my daughter to be compassionate, to be kind to people, to have friends, to have very strong relationships with others and that is what they do at Foundations Early Learning Center. My daughter will have a solid foundation when she leaves here.

One way Foundations Early Learning Center promoted inclusive practices that strengthened authentic relationships between children in the classroom was through the creation of a girls group. The girls group met once a week and addressed certain topics that promoted healthy friendship skills. Marshall identified one benefit of the Reggio

Emilia inspired program was that her daughter got to be a part of the girls group.

Marshall explained that the girls group supported girls in learning about friendship and tried to eliminate bullying or other unwanted behaviors, “The group meets once a week and there are different things that they do to build relationships and make sure the girls are interacting appropriately. They work on being aware of their peers’ feelings and compassion.”

Parent participants also described how educators at Foundations Early Learning Center supported healthy emotional development through supporting and honoring all emotions. Johns shared a story of how educators at Foundations Early Learning Center supported her daughter emotionally,

Today I got an email from my daughter’s teacher that my daughter got very upset. She was building some elaborate house and it was time to pick up and she wasn’t ready. The teacher wrote me an email about how my daughter got mad, explained the tools they used to distract her, and asked my daughter to tell her how she was feeling and how she wanted to express her anger. My daughter drew a picture and the teacher sent me a picture of it. I knew probably how mad she was but stuff like that I’m not going to get at KinderCare.

Theme 9: Constructivist-Based Learning: Learn Through Doing

At Foundations Early Learning Center learning was approached with a constructivist-based foundation as it was in Reggio Emilia philosophy. One identified benefit from parents of the Reggio Emilia inspired Foundations Early Learning Center was that children had the opportunity to actively participate in their learning. One aspect

of a constructivist-based approach to learning is that children are given opportunities to learn through doing. Smith described her interpretation of how Foundations Early Learning Center fostered constructivist-based learning with the children, “It’s not just “here’s a piece of paper and write an A”. It’s making meaning and building upon those ideas that the children already have, explaining that knowledge, and bringing it to another form through action.” Johnson gave examples of how educators at Foundations Early Learning Center have integrated an active approach to learning, “I love that children write in the sand with pipe cleaners, mold letters with their hands, use their bodies to move. The teachers integrate the learning into doing”. Smith explained that children were given opportunities to actively participate in their education at Foundations Early Learning Center,

The children did an obstacle course one day and my son had all these great ideas.

I heard about this obstacle course for weeks about how he would just try one thing and that didn’t work so he got to try something else. It gave him space and the opportunity to really manipulate things and his ideas with his body.

Marshall gave an example of how children were offered open-ended materials on the playground at Foundations Early Learning Center that encouraged active participation,

The teachers give children time to play, explore, test, and see what materials. For an example, they had little pumpkins outside. They also had pipes cut. The kids were learning to elevate those cut pipes, roll the pumpkins, and push them down the slide. I think the teachers at other schools I’ve gone to would have been like,

“oh no, no, no, you can’t do that”. Here, the teachers let the kids roll the big pumpkins down the slide. This process is teaching the children to see what they can experiment and do.

Theme 10: Nature and Outside Classroom Experiences

Reggio Emilia programs in Italy are known for the integration of learning outside the classroom walls with offering daily outdoor opportunities for children. Foundations Early Learning Center followed the Reggio Emilia philosophy by extending the classroom to the outdoors for children daily. At Foundations Early Learning Center, a large aspect of the children’s classroom experiences was centered around the access and availability to a state recreation area within walking distance from the school. The state recreation area was a sanctuary for nature experiences that included a pond, trees, living animals, and insects. Nature walks were embedded into the daily practice and curriculum at Foundations Early Learning Center. Marshall identified one associated benefit for her daughter attending the Reggio Emilia inspired program was the daily nature and outside experiences that were offered,

Being outside daily, being able to go on nature walks, and just having the big open space for the children to explore. It was the fact that they still go outdoors every single day and it doesn’t matter what the weather is. At times, the children get the opportunity to stop and view what is out in the pond or in the water. Then they can draw what they see and do an expressional art piece. My children come home rolled in mud and I have to change them before they get into the car, but you know they had a good day.

Johnson explained that her son benefited from being outside every day at Foundations Early Learning Center, “I think my son and most of the kids are happiest when they’re outdoors. I love how the educators at Foundations Early Learning Center incorporate nature into everything”. The integration nature and outdoor experiences into the everyday learning at Foundations Early Learning Center was very important to Smith, I don’t think that my daughter would have cared about rocks or animals or the bugs on the ground. After she attended Foundations Early Learning Center, she is very attuned to all that nature stuff. Being outside and being a part of nature and having that integrated into the curriculum was just huge for both my husband and I. The director was talking about nature being another teacher. I was like that is exactly it. This is how kids learn. A natural way of learning.

Discrepant Cases

All five parent participants shared very similar lived experiences and identified similar beneficial aspects after their children attended a Reggio Emilia inspired program. Most parent participants confirmed similar results in a positive direction for their child that attended a Reggio Emilia inspired program. Although all five parents gave a majority of positive results, one discrepant concern from one parent related to their children’s lived experiences at Reggio Emilia inspired Foundations Early Learning Center was acknowledged during the parent interview. One concern described from parent participant, Johns, was a concern she had for her daughter who had not yet learned how to write the letters in her name after being at Foundations Early Learning Center for 6 months,

I'm not saying there's anything wrong with what they're doing at Foundations Early Learning Center, but I thought by now my daughter would know how to write her name. Her name is not common and it is kind of a little bit longer. She knows the letters, but she doesn't put them in order. She's getting there so hopefully by the end of this year she'll be able to write it.

In Reggio Emilia programs, writing experiences are typically embedded into projects or interests of children with the goal to create meaningful writing opportunities within that context. Although one out of the five parents voiced a concern that her child had not learned how to yet write her name, none of the other parents voiced the same concern and the overall lived experience described by Johns was in favor of the Reggio Emilia approach to education for her daughter's early learning program.

Summary

Through the current study, 5 parents were interviewed with the intention to gain insights into parents interpretations of Reggio Emilia philosophy from their children's lived experiences. The Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education is unique with a method for working with children that is an organic and innovative. Through Research Question 1, an investigation of the lived experiences of parents who chose and enrolled their children in a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia inspired early childhood program was conducted. After results from interviews with parent participants were analyzed, 5 themes emerged from the 5 participants that answered what lived experiences influenced parents decisions to choose a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia inspired program for their children.

Parents answered with similar responses that resulted in understanding the process of finding, choosing, and deciding on a Reggio Emilia inspired program for their children in the American Midwest. Results from the first research question displayed that parents chose a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia inspired program after parents conducted their own research to find out what Reggio Emilia philosophy was. The second theme that emerged was that parents made an informed decision by touring Foundations Early Learning Center as well as alternative program options. The third theme was that parents chose a Reggio Emilia inspired program based an intrinsic feeling. Theme 4 that emerged from the current study was that parents purposely chose against a traditional, non-constructivist-based approach to early childhood education. The final theme that emerged from research question one was that parents found satisfaction when they chose a Reggio Emilia inspired program over non-constructivist based programs.

In Research Question 2, the associated benefits parents perceived that were achieved after they enrolled their children in a Reggio Emilia inspired program were discovered. All ten themes that emerged from Research Question 2 paralleled the core values that were articulated from Reggio Emilia Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Children (2010). Most themes overlapped with other themes because in Reggio Emilia philosophy, the core tenets were so connected to the next. All themes that emerged were related to philosophy, teaching, environment, and values of the Reggio Emilia early childhood program pedagogy. Ten core themes developed from the results that helped to answer Research Question 2 for when parents identified associated benefits of their children because of attending a Reggio Emilia inspired program. The first benefit that

was identified by parents was their children were given opportunities daily to be creative. A second perceived benefit was the individualized care and learning that was given from the educators at the Reggio Emilia inspired program. A third associated benefit identified from parent participants was the Reggio Emilia approach to learning that was interest, inquiry, and project-based. Theme number 4 acknowledged one benefit for children who attended a Reggio Emilia inspired program was the value that was placed on communication and documentation. The fifth theme identified that the intentional classroom environment and choice of materials offered to the children was beneficial. Another theme that emerged from the second research question was the unique approach educators in Reggio Emilia inspired classrooms had when they worked with children. Theme 7 viewed children as capable, an associated benefit identified by parents. An eighth theme was the authentic relationships and focus on the social-emotional development in children at the Reggio Emilia inspired program. For theme 9 parents identified the constructivist-based learning was an associated benefit at Foundations Early Learning Center. The final theme identified from parents was the benefit their children acquired from being given nature and outside classroom experiences daily. In Chapter 5, more detailed information on the interpretations of findings, explanation of limitations, recommendations for future research, implications of results, and researcher's reflections will be included.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The goal of the current study was to investigate parents' reasons for choosing a Reggio Emilia inspired program for their children and to further understand advantages for choosing this philosophy. Reggio Emilia philosophy contrasts a traditional, academic, teacher-directed approach to early childhood education and instead implements an intentional, interactive, collaborative, constructivist-based tactic. The first research question was focused on the lived experiences of parents who chose to enroll their children in a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia inspired early childhood program included. Parents conducted their own research to learn about Reggio Emilia and made informed decisions to enroll their children in the Reggio Emilia inspired program after they toured Foundations Early Learning Center and alternative programs. Parents chose a Reggio Emilia inspired program based on positive intrinsic feelings the parents had after they toured Foundations Early Learning Center. Parents purposely chose against a traditional, nonconstructivist approach for their children's early childhood education experience. After their children were enrolled at Foundations Early Learning Center, all parents identified a satisfaction for choosing a Reggio Emilia inspired program over alternative programs.

Findings from Research Question 2 answered what the associated benefits were that parents perceived were achieved after the parents enrolled their children in a Reggio Emilia inspired program. Access to daily creative opportunities that were provided for their children, an individualized approach to caring and tailoring learning to each child,

and satisfaction for interest, inquiry, and project-based learning were three associated benefits identified from the results of the current study. The educators style of communication and the use of documentation that displayed what the students learned was identified from parents as beneficial. Special attention to the classroom environment and choice of materials offered, the positive ways that educators approached working with children, and viewing children as capable were all associated benefits identified from parents. A focus on the creation of authentic relationships between educators, families, and students along with attention to the social-emotional development to children was another associated benefit. Parents identified a constructivist-based learning approach where educators gave children opportunities to learn through active participation as a positive advantage of the Reggio Emilia inspired program. Last, parents identified the extension of classroom experiences into the outdoors and in nature as beneficial to their children.

Interpretation of Findings

Findings of the current study have the possibility to extend knowledge in the field of early childhood education related to Reggio Emilia philosophy in the United States. Results shared in the current study have the power to bring awareness of how a program in the American Midwest have implemented the Italian Reggio Emilia philosophy into practice in their program and understand the stories parents shared about their children's experiences. Results of the current study represent lived experiences of parents who chose a Reggio Emilia inspired program over alternative options for their children. Within the results, parents identified the core foundational tenets of Reggio Emilia

pedagogy as a valuable choice for the approach to early childhood education for their children.

Connection to past Literature Related to Research Question 1

Key findings from the first research question focused on why parents have chosen and enrolled their children in a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia inspired program over alternative programs. Other research has supported the choice of a Reggio Emilia inspired program. For example, Mathis (2011) investigated experiences of using social constructivist Reggio Emilia philosophy in a state-funded preschool program in California and suggested for future research from early childhood leaders to advocate for the recognition of a strong image of the child as found in Reggio Emilia philosophy and to add more literature for how Reggio Emilia programs contribute to developmentally appropriate practices for young children. Through the current study, parental satisfaction for choosing a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia program over alternative program options was found. Parent participants in the current study identified satisfaction with the Reggio Emilia philosophy and the developmentally appropriate approach focused on the vision of children as strong and capable, as suggested by Mathis (2011).

One purpose of my current study was to examine why parents made the choice for a Reggio Emilia inspired program versus an alternative early childhood program approach for their preschool-aged children. Recchia and Bentley (2013) also investigated parental perceptions for their children's preschool experiences at a child-centered preschool program. Like the current study, Recchia and Bentley gathered data from the parents' perspective (p. 8). The investigation to examine Reggio Emilia experiences from

parents as participants was one participant group that was not typical in much of the past literature found.

Connection to past Literature Related to Research Question 2

Research Question 2 was focused the associated benefits for children in a Reggio Emilia inspired program in the American Midwest. The current study confirmed that parents who chose a Reggio Emilia inspired program viewed the experiences as beneficial and were satisfied with their choice of a constructivist-based program over alternative program options for their children. The results of one study that was conducted from Stowell (2014) suggested conducting future research to extend knowledge of Reggio Emilia inspired practices in the United States for educational stakeholders. Stowell suggested for future researchers to conduct studies that would add literature to show how an arts-based Reggio Emilia education is beneficial to children with the goal to bring more awareness for stakeholders who developed curriculum for kindergartens in the United States. Findings from my current study support Stowell's suggestion with evidence for how parents perceived their children who attended an arts-based Reggio Emilia program as positive. Parent participants from the current study identified benefits that were related to an arts-based, Reggio Emilia inspired education and included that children were given the opportunity to actively be involved in their own education, educators supported individual learning styles, and children were given opportunities for creative arts experiences daily.

From the current study, one perceived benefit identified from parent participants was that Reggio Emilia educators supported children in their social and emotional

development. A connection to similar results of the current study in relation to social-emotional benefits from Reggio Emilia programs was also found in a study from Schneider et al. (2014), who examined educators' attention to building positive social-emotional skills in children as they transitioned to kindergarten from a Reggio Emilia inspired preschool program.

Another perceived benefit parents identified was how a Reggio Emilia classroom environment was arranged with careful attention to the choice of materials offered to children. Parents declared that the creation of a classroom environment that was appealing and gave children the freedom to explore, create, and engage was beneficial. Smith (2014) conducted a case study in Chicago on students who attended a Reggio Emilia inspired program. Through Smith's investigation, parents identified that when students were given freedom to explore classroom materials at will, positive benefits for children's interests in learning was a result. New (1989) also supported that part of the creation of classroom environments in Reggio Emilia programs was to provide materials for students that fostered the *hundred languages of learning*. Materials are placed in Reggio Emilia classrooms with careful attention that appealed to students in aesthetically pleasing ways. Further, the creation of Reggio Emilia environments supports that "The emphasis on aesthetics and the visual arts fosters a genuine art appreciation, and is expanded, through a constructivist curriculum, as a form of exploration as well as expression" (New, 1989, p. 13). Results from New displayed similar results as the current study and identified the intentional choice of materials and classroom environments as a benefit in Reggio Emilia inspired programs.

Findings Related to Conceptual Framework

Reggio Emilia early childhood programs are rooted in the constructivism learning theory developed by Bruner, Dewey, Gardner, Piaget, Vygotsky, Malaguzzi, and others (Edwards et al., 2012; Firlick, 1995; Hewett, 2001). The theory of constructivism was related to the research questions and phenomenological research design because the topic being studied, Reggio Emilia philosophy, was founded on the theory of constructivism. Understanding the constructivist framework as the foundation of Reggio Emilia early childhood philosophy helped to explain what lived experiences and benefits should be expected of children that attended a Reggio Emilia inspired program.

One value that was integrated from educators in Reggio Emilia programs was the inclusion of children as active participants and constructors in their learning (McNally & Slutsky, 2017). The vision of children as active participants in their own education was the foundational idea of constructivism and the base of Reggio Emilia philosophy. In Reggio Emilia programs, children are given opportunities to be involved in the process of learning because children were viewed as having rights as citizens of the world (Bond, 2015; New, 1989; Schneider et al., 2014; Swann, 2008). Data collected from the current study indicated that parents were in favor of a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia inspired program that gave children opportunities to be active participants in their education.

Findings of the current study related to the foundation of constructivism was similar to results that were found in an empirical study conducted by Zorec (2015). Results of Zorec's research displayed the importance of listening to children that creates

democratic and supportive learning climates in constructivist-based programs. Similar to the results of Zorec's research, in the current study all five parent participants described constructivism as how Reggio Emilia educators viewed children as active participants. In the current study parents described the strategies educators implemented constructivism in the classroom was through following interests in the creation of classroom projects, how educators viewed children as capable, and how classrooms were designed with the inclusion of ateliers and materials that honored the individual strengths of all children.

Limitations of the Study

One limitation addressed in Chapter 1 was how to control for researcher bias. One disadvantage of a phenomenological research design is researcher bias because of the difficulty to remove all personal experiences of the researcher from the study (Moustakas, 1994). To control for bias, experiences related to Reggio Emilia philosophy were bracketed that helped me to become aware of the assumptions I brought to my research through my past personal experiences (see Moustaka, 1994). As the sole researcher of the current study, I reflected on my own experiences of working in multiple Reggio Emilia inspired early childhood programs in the United States, living in Italy for one and a half years, being a current NAREA. member, attending the Reggio Emilia Wonder of Learning exhibit, being on the committee to bring the Reggio Emilia Wonder of Learning exhibit to Michigan in 2017, and being an educational advocate for the constructivist-based Reggio Emilia philosophy (see Creswell, 2013). The process of bracketing helped me to realize and reflect on my biases and to do my best to remove any biases that would impact the current study.

The second limitation to the current study included an acknowledgment that parents who were interviewed about the process of choosing a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia program had their children enrolled at Foundations Early Learning Center for at least six months. After 6 months had passed from the time the parents had gone through the decision-making process, a possible limitation was parents ability to accurately recall specific details related to choosing the Reggio Emilia program at the time of the interview. It was also intentional to let a significant period of time pass to gain a deeper understanding from parents of the essence of the Reggio Emilia program experience. During interviews with parents, they were able to recall the process of choosing and sharing experiences of the Reggio Emilia inspired program after 6 months time had passed with ease.

One limitation that was not addressed in Chapter 1, but contributed to the trustworthiness of the study was that after 10 weeks of trying to recruit parent participants to be a part of my study, only 5 parents agreed to be interviewed. In my original plan, a sample size of 5 to 10 participants was anticipated. If more parents would have agreed to be a part of my study, the current study could have possibly been more transferable to future research. The last limitation related to the demographics of the participants in the study was that all 5 participants were white, of higher socio-economic status, and had at least a bachelor's degree in Education. It is important to note that the chosen data collection site, Foundations Early Learning Center, did not offer scholarships or discounts for families of lower-socioeconomic status. Foundations Early Learning Center was tuition based and may have excluded families who were not able to financially afford

to enroll their children in the program. As many Reggio Emilia inspired programs in the United States are privately owned and tuition-based, accessibility for families of lower income levels can sometimes be limited (Smith, 2014).

Recommendations

As explained by Moustakas, a researcher becomes an expert on their topic of study because the researcher investigates all prior research on the specific topic, acquires the newest literature related to the topic, and becomes proficient to recognize areas of future research related to the topic (1994). Results from the current study indicated a need for further investigations that included one area of future research to examine how children transition from a Reggio Emilia inspired program into a traditional, public school kindergarten. Four out of 5 parent participants of the current study were concerned for how their children would transition from a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia inspired preschool program philosophy into a traditional, nonconstructivist-based public school educational philosophy for kindergarten. Johns explained a concern for her daughter when she will finish preschool at Foundations Early Learning Center and will have to attend public school for kindergarten,

I think that it is going to be really difficult next year when my daughter goes to kindergarten because it is a big transition. If she was used to this type of philosophy and then the same philosophy will not continue in kindergarten. This is what worries me is that she is used to a way of doing things and then it is going to be worksheets, sit at the desk, and it will be completely different in public

school. I worry about the transition. The more I think about the transition, the more I'm nervous for my daughter next year to attend public education.

Previous studies from Hall (2013) investigated how Reggio Emilia philosophy was integrated in mainstream education in Australia. Schneider et al. (2014) examined how educators in Reggio Emilia, Italy instilled practices to help smooth transitions for students into public education programs from a Reggio Emilia early childhood program. Previously mentioned studies are similar in scope to what I am suggesting for future research, yet a suggestion for an examination of students who attended a Reggio Emilia inspired early childhood program and then transitioned to a traditional, public education kindergarten in the United States is needed. Parents, educators, policymakers, and those people who are invested in early childhood education may benefit from future research that would focus on the transition from a Reggio Emilia program into a public school kindergarten.

All 5 parent participants asked questions about the possibility and availability of Reggio Emilia inspired programs for elementary aged students. The second area of recommendation for future research that came from results of the current study was to conduct an investigation of Reggio Emilia inspired programs for elementary age students in the United States. Smith explained her desire for Reggio Emilia inspired programs in elementary years for her daughter,

If I could take this program and expand it in elementary school, if that existed near us then that would be where my daughter would go. I mean I look at like other countries like Finland and they have completely done away with all subjects

and follow the inquiry-based learning approach as in Reggio Emilia. I would love if my children could attend a Reggio Emilia program in elementary school.

A recommendation for future research from the results of the current study would be to investigate elementary aged Reggio Emilia inspired programs in the United States with the intention to bring a deeper awareness of possible benefits and experiences of a constructivist-based educational philosophy for school-aged students.

Implications

Social change is defined as the ability to bring awareness, change in values, or cultural norms on a topic. The intention of the current study, was to implement social change through bringing awareness of the impact that a high-quality, developmentally appropriate early childhood program, Reggio Emilia, may have on children. With the intention to specifically examine how constructivist-based Reggio Emilia early childhood program instilled advantages for children from the parents perspective was explored. Ample evidence supports an interactive, developmentally appropriate, play-based approach to early childhood programs as in Reggio Emilia programs (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Miller & Almon, 2009). Yet, the problem remained that despite credible research to support a constructivist-based approach like Reggio Emilia, policymakers continue to push for a more academic-based philosophy that aligns preschool standards with kindergarten expectations due to standardized testing in public schools (McNally & Slutsky, 2017).

Results of the current study displayed a high level of satisfaction for parents who chose a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia inspired program over alternative program

options for their children in the American Midwest. One major implication of social change that could be implied through results of the current study was that parents identified that their young children learned through an active participatory approach to education. Parents explained that when children were seen as capable and were given opportunities to be involved in their education, children thrived. Reggio Emilia, a constructivist-based early childhood philosophy that originated in Northern Italy, proved to be an excellent model to facilitate optimum learning in young children. The early childhood programs that were created in Reggio Emilia, Italy in the 1940s took the opposite method of a traditional educational approach. As described by McNally and Slutsky the educational approach in Reggio Emilia was intentional, “The challenge was to educate in a different way” (2017, pg. 1935).

It was the intention of my current research to bring awareness of the advantages of a nontraditional, developmentally appropriate, early childhood educational approach in the context of implementation in the United States. Results from the current study concluded that all parent participants had a deep satisfaction for the nontraditional Reggio Emilia early childhood approach for their children. Parents described deep satisfaction for their children enrolled in a Reggio Emilia inspired program because the philosophy was unique from a traditional approach. The Reggio Emilia philosophy differed from traditional, nonconstructivist early childhood programs because Reggio Emilia philosophy was centered around viewing children as rich in potential, competent, and included children’s theories in their day-to-day learning (Fyfe, 2011; McNally & Slutsky, 2017). In an effort to contribute to social change, results of the current study provided

policymakers, educators, childcare centers, parents, and early childhood advocates the evidence for the positive advantages of implementing Reggio Emilia philosophy into early childhood programs in the United States.

Researcher's Reflections

Throughout my career in the field of early childhood education I have lived in various areas of the country that included cities in California, Illinois, Italy, and Michigan. I worked in nine early childhood programs that followed various educational philosophies that ranged from Creative Curriculum, Head Start, HighScope, Montessori, play-based, traditional academic, programs that claimed they were Reggio Emilia, but in action were not, and one program that followed the Reggio Emilia philosophy closely. After working as an early childhood educator for 14 years, I have witnessed first hand the powerful impact a programs educational philosophy has on the children's experience and learning. In my experience, I found a significant difference between programs that were truly following Reggio Emilia versus programs that followed a traditional, teacher-directed philosophy. A significant difference was that Reggio Emilia inspired programs started learning with a child-centered, constructivist-based approach while traditional programs typically constructed learning with an opposite approach that was top-down. In Reggio Emilia inspired classrooms, children were given rights as citizens of the world, children's ideas were used as an impetus for learning, and classroom environments were created with careful intention.

The approach used in Reggio Emilia programs was unique because learning experiences were created to intentionally support children's natural way of learning. In

Reggio Emilia inspired programs when children were given opportunities to discuss, theorize, and have their voices heard the learning unfolded naturally and with joy. Children in Reggio Emilia classrooms were guided by educators that acted as researchers, observed children, and intentionally created learning opportunities based on the interests of the children in the classroom. When learning in Reggio Emilia programs were crafted with careful intention with children's authentic interests in mind, the results were that children displayed eagerness, curiosity, excitement, and were filled with a spark for learning. In Reggio Emilia programs, children were encouraged to be active participants in their education: educators encouraged children to touch, feel, smell, hear, and experience learning through doing. From my first hand experiences, the elements of a Reggio Emilia philosophy created a positive impact on children's early educational experiences that created joy-filled learning environments.

Conclusion

Early childhood education is in a state of crisis in the United States as standardized testing in elementary public schools have been pushed down onto expectations in preschools that are not developmentally appropriate (Apple, 2008; Christakis, 2016; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Miller, & Almon, 2009) With ample research displaying results for early childhood programs that are interactive, childled, and play-based, it is vital to preserve and advocate for an educational philosophy in early childhood that supports and benefits children's natural way of learning. It is my hope that results of the current research will provide support for the Reggio Emilia inspired

educational philosophy in the United States that is interactive, developmentally appropriate, and constructivist-based that supports children's natural way of learning.

The aim of the current doctoral study was to bring awareness to others of perceived benefits and overall lived experiences of parents who chose a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia early childhood philosophy over alternative program options for their children in the American Midwest. Results from the current study indicated the approval from parents who chose a Reggio Emilia early childhood philosophy for their children. Parent participants in the current study explained that part of their satisfaction for choosing the Reggio Emilia inspired program for their children was because the philosophy honored children's capabilities and included children as active participants in their education. The integration and expansion of Reggio Emilia philosophy into more early childhood programs in the United States has the potential to result in developmentally appropriate, beneficial, valuable, and joyous learning experiences for young children and their families.

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Appendix A: Invitation to Participate

Initial letter distributed to parents of children in the preschool classroom at Foundations Early Learning Center who have attended the program for a minimum of 6 months.

Heidi Harris

Dear Families,

This letter is an invitation to consider participating in my dissertation study as part of my doctoral degree in the Department of Early Childhood Education at Walden University under the supervision of Dr. Grace Lappin. I would like to provide you with more information about this project in your consideration for participation.

The purpose of this study is to gather more information from parents on why they choose a constructivist based, Reggio Emilia early childhood program, for their children to attend. It is the goal of this study to understand parental perceived benefits after their children attended a Reggio Emilia inspired program and to gather information on the overall experience for their children.

Foundations Early Learning Center was chosen as my data collection site as it is a Reggio Emilia inspired program in the American Midwest that integrates the core values of the Reggio Emilia philosophy. I am seeking out parent participants of children whom have attended Foundations Early Learning Center at least 6 months to gather information on reasons why parents chose this type of program, what their overall experiences were, and to gain more data on details on the constructivist based Reggio Emilia program.

Participation in this study is voluntary. It will involve an interview of approximately one hour in length. If you are interested in participating in the study, please email Heidi.hotchkin@waldenu.edu. After Heidi has received your email, she will send you a consent form that will give more details for how to proceed and give consent for participation in the study.

My hope is that the results of my study will be of benefit to children, families, parents, policymakers, and educational stakeholders in the local and national communities. It is my goal that through my data collection, the results will contribute to greater understanding for a Reggio Emilia, constructivist based early childhood experience and what perceived benefits children have experienced from attending. Thank you in advance for your time.

Sincerely, Heidi Harris, PhD Student in Early Childhood Education at Walden University

Appendix B: Interview Questions for Parent Participants

**“Parental Choice and Perceived Benefits for Children
Who Attended Reggio Emilia Inspired Program”.**

Interview Questions:

Basic Information:

Parent Name:

Parent Gender:

Parent Age:

Marriage Status:

Education Achieved:

Current Occupation:

Number of Children:

Ages of Children:

City in which you live:

Home Proximity to Foundations Early Learning Center:

Background Information:

- At what age did your child start attending Foundations Early Learning Center?
- What age is your child now? How long have they attended?
- What classroom is your child in now?
- Do you have any background related to early childhood education? If so, what?

Choice:

- Think back to when you were choosing an early childhood program for your child, what was most important to you when you enrolled your child in an early childhood program?
- Tell me about your experience choosing Foundations Early Learning Center program over alternative programs?
- What events or circumstances colored your decision to enroll your child at Foundations Early Learning Center?
- Did you visit other early childhood programs before you made a decision to enroll your child at Foundations Early Learning Center?
 - If so, what stood out to you that helped you to choose Foundations Early Learning Center over alternatives?
- How do you think your child’s experience may have been different if you chose a program that was traditional, teacher-directed, sit-down at desk type atmosphere?
- When your child first began at Foundations Early Learning Center, did you set goals for your child? If so, what were they?

Philosophy:

- Foundations Early Learning Centers is a Reggio Emilia inspired program: what does that mean to you?
- Before your child attended Foundations Early Learning Center, what did you know about the Reggio Emilia approach?
- After your child has now attended Foundations Early Learning Center, what do you now know about the Reggio Emilia approach?
- What do you know about constructivist-based learning?
 - **If they answer nothing:** Reggio Emilia programs are constructivist based in their approach to learning, which means the child is seen as an active participant (learn through doing versus passive participant).
 - What do the teachers at Foundations Early Learning Center do on a daily basis that integrates a constructivist based learning model with your child?
- What do you think Foundations Early Learning Center does to support your child's learning?
- In terms of your children's educators approach to working with your child, what type of approach do they use?
- Professional development is one aspect of Reggio Emilia practice that is important; do you notice the educators doing this? If so, how?
- What about documentation of learning- making learning visible? Do you see evidence of this in the classroom?
- What are the elements of the nature-based preschool philosophy at Foundations do you feel may also be a part of the Reggio Emilia philosophy?

Perceived Benefits:

- What does a typical day look like in the life of your child at Foundations Early Learning Center?
- What are the expectations of your child from their educators? What do you think the educators expect from your child?
- What skills do you feel your child is obtaining at Foundations Early Learning Center?
 - What influence does the educational approach have on the skills your child is acquiring?
- What do you believe are your child's most treasured experiences while they have attended Foundations Early Childhood Center?
- What would your child say is their favorite experiences of attending Foundations Early Childhood Center?
- What goals do you wish to see your child accomplish after graduating from Foundations Early Childhood Center?
- What are the most important experiences from Foundations Early Learning Center will be beneficial to your child?
- What do you believe are positive benefits to your child's educational experience at Foundations Early Learning Center?

- How would you describe your experience at Foundations Early Learning Center to other parents whom are interested to enroll their own child in the program?
- What do you anticipate for your child's schooling experiences in the future after attending here for their first educational experience?
- Are there any other comments, stories, or explanations you would like to give for your experience as a parent of a child whom attended a Reggio Emilia inspired program?