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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to all the teachers who are advocating for play in their own classrooms – who are overcoming barriers to ensure equitable outcomes for their children. You are not alone. Keep up the good fight. Our kids need you.

Abstract

There is a growing body of research behind the play-based movement in education today – a topic that is somewhat controversial (Nicolopoulou et al., 2010; Overstreet, 2018). While some are steeped in a more classical approach to early education, advocating learning should be *painful* (Adler & Van Doren, 1988), others are paving the way for a more progressive approach, suggesting play to be the premier window into a child's development (Paley, 1979-2014; Wohlwend & Peppler, 2015). The purpose of this study was to look at how the perceptions of pre- and in-service teachers changed regarding play and storytelling after participating in a play and inquiry practicum. The study examined the experiences of 27 teachers, each with a story as unique as the person they grew to become. In an effort to understand, holistically, how the teachers were growing and changing, a triangulation of methods were employed - including the documentation of daily interactions, quantitative analyses, and in-depth interviews. The teachers, overall, reported a philosophical awakening, following the week of readings (Pre-Survey Composite = 1,565). For most, a slight reservation about the practical aspects of play, following the intensive week of teacher preparation work (Post 1 Composite = 1,487). And finally, a better understanding of play, theoretically *and* practically, following the three week play and inquiry workshop with the community children (Post 2 Composite = 1,513).

Keywords: play, teachers' perceptions, practicum experiences, early childhood education

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Introduction

> *There is no activity for which young children are better prepared than fantasy play. Nothing is more dependable and risk-free, and the dangers are only pretend. What we are in danger of doing is delegitimizing mankind's oldest and best-used learning tool. (Vivian Paley, 2004, p. 8)*

There is a growing body of research behind the play-based movement in education today – a topic that is somewhat controversial (Nicolopoulou et al., 2010; Overstreet, 2018; Pyle et al., 2018; Wohlwend, 2017). While some are steeped in a more classical approach to early education, advocating learning should be *painful* (Adler & Van Doren, 1988), others are paving the way for a more progressive approach, suggesting play to be the premier window into a child's development – how children grapple with fear, explore the unknown, live out their biggest fantasies, and more (Paley, 1979-2014; Wohlwend & Peppler, 2015). My personal belief, which has been heavily influenced by a number of educational theorists, is that play is much more than merely *play*. It is how a child connects with their environment and ultimately, how they build their worldview. Play in all of its simplicities and complexities, is the *work* of young children (Vygotsky, 1978). It is a meaning-making system in which children scaffold their understanding of the world around them (Piaget, 1999). Over the years, I have come to appreciate the value of play and the holistic development it offers to a young child.

As a play researcher, I stand on the shoulders of many educational theorists. Lev Vygotsky (1978), who believed that young children played *a head above,* using play as a tool to aid them in their development. Jean Piaget (1999), who believed children, when engaged in their surroundings, actively constructed their own knowledge. Howard Gardner (1983), who believes that intelligence is multifaceted and displayed in a variety of ways. Erik Erikson (1993), who

believed that children learned through their interactions with others. Maria Montessori (1995), who believed that children had absorbent minds and learned best through real-life experiences. Loris Malaguzzi (1997), who believed that children expressed their knowledge through 100 different languages. John Dewey (1990), who focused on the process of learning, rather than the product, and believed that children learned best through play and lived experiences. Lastly, Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) who believed that the child's social environment greatly impacted their development both directly and indirectly through various ecological systems.

I am most significantly influenced and inspired by the work of Vivian Paley (1979-2014) who was a keen observer of children's play. Her methods as a teacher-researcher and story-collector have majorly informed the field of early education (Cremin et al., 2018; Nicolopoulou et al., 2010). Paley (2004), like so many educational theorists before her, believed that play was the *work* of young children and embedded within this belief she realized storytelling to be *play* in written form. She was a catalyst of change in her classroom. Paley (1979) suggested that play, "is the pathway to learning in which differences are valued and rewarded because they enhance the creative potential of the imagination" (p. 136). She went on to say "children do not ask: Where do you come from? They ask: What role will you play?" (Paley, 1979, p. 136).

Play as a Catalyst for Social Change

I was introduced to Vivian Paley's (1979) view of play and storytelling as a graduate student. For my practicum experience, I participated in a Play and Inquiry Workshop put on by my university that championed Paley's (1979) methods. We took in children from the community, some of whom were required by the state to attend summer school, students who were *at risk* according to the state. These students were joined by other community students, children who wanted to spend their days playing in the sun. The children grew together over the

course of that summer – learning from each other, playing together, and sharing their stories. It was a truly diverse and rich environment for the children to play, and it made a tremendous impact on me as an educator. Prior to experiencing the workshop first-hand, I had practiced a more teacher-driven curricula in the classroom. I believed in a teacher-directed approach to education, in which a teacher was a conduit of knowledge, and children learned passively. I thought I knew the best approaches for early education – strategies that were steeped in tradition, tried and true, and unquestioned; strategies that were, perhaps, driven into schools as a product of colonization. What I experienced during my summer practicum brought many of my teacher persuasions into question, and, ultimately, shifted my entire trajectory.

The mission of the summer practicum was to take over a local school and transform it through the power of play; to bring in preservice (or in-service) teachers and have them experience play and storytelling first-hand. To many (including myself), play was just that – *play*. Play was a pastime, something to keep the children entertained, or busy. It was surface-level and offered no insight into the child's development. It was not something to be researched, not something to be taken seriously, and was often the first thing cut from a curricular program to make time for *real learning*. This real learning was observed in lectures, small groups, and teacher-guided activities. It was purposefully planned, never spontaneous, never centered on the child. It was guided by curriculum; it was measurable and assessable. It was quiet, submissive, orderly in appearance. It centered on standards and state testing. It covered all the bases; it was everything a young child needed to know to be *successful* in school. It was, at best, a classical model of education (Adler & Van Doren, 1988). It was not innovative, or risky, or creative, or empowering, or collaborative, or contributing at all to the building of schemas. It just was *what it was*, and I was perfectly okay with that – that was, until the summer of 2013.

Assumptions

The practicum experience I gained in the summer of 2013 was transformative for me in so many ways, and I am curious if this program is impacting other teachers in the way that it has impacted me. These assumptions of play, storytelling, and the impact of a play-based practicum are the driving forces behind this study. I assume play to be critical to a child's development and also assume play to be overlooked and underused in the early childhood classroom. It is my belief that preservice teachers are inadequately informed on play-based practices and theories during their teacher preparation programs. Likewise, I assume that there is a deficit on immersive play-based practicum experiences, where teachers can experience the intermingling of play and learning. I assume there to be a classical lean on teacher preparation and pedagogy and further believe that early childhood teachers are at a disadvantage when entering their classrooms, when compared to their later elementary and secondary education peers (due to a push toward more teacher-directed approaches). I believe this to be largely due to practicum experiences that are classical in their approach. Further, I assume that if early childhood teachers could be immersed in a play-based practicum experience as part of their teacher preparation program, they would see the power of play and would become advocates for play in their own classroom. It is this assumption, particularly, that drives me to pursue this research. I believe that teachers' perceptions of play will shift positively and significantly as a result of this practicum experience. This experience gave me insight into play-based theory and practices, and, ultimately, shifted my entire professional and academic trajectory. I cannot help but assume it will be transformational for other teachers, as well.

As a researcher, I am aware that my own ontological assumptions may be implied throughout this study – assumptions of play, environmental influences, and what is considered

best practice in early childhood education. My epistemological assumptions may cause me to assume connections between perceptions of play and environmental influences (including teacher education and practicum experience, as well as any number of environmental factors that may contribute to the understanding of play) and my axiological assumptions may be explicit in my understanding and defense of play.

Methods, Context, and Theory

In order to conduct this research, I have elected to take a mixed-methods approach. The study will take place at a summer practicum hosted by a large university in the south-central region of the United States. The participants involved are undergraduate and graduate students who are completing the practicum as part of their teacher preparation coursework. The summer practicum is play-based and child-centered, where children are given free rein to play and learn as their interests drive them. Participants will be pre- and post-surveyed using the Future Professionals Survey developed by Jung and Jin (2014) as the primary quantitative instrument. This survey was developed to determine teachers' perceptions of play and play-based practices. In addition to the surveys, participants will be interviewed mid-way into their practicum experience to see if and how their perceptions of play are shifting. Further qualitative methods will be employed, including spontaneous, in-process, semi-structured interviews throughout the duration of the practicum to note if and how teachers' interactions with children align with survey responses. This combination of methods will help us to understand the teachers' perceptions of play more fully and will give us a richer insight into how those perceptions change as a result of this play-based practicum. This research is grounded in social constructivism, in which meaning is derived from a multitude of perspectives (Creswell & Poth,

2018). As teachers offer their unique perceptions of play, meaning is interpreted, and the phenomenon is understood more robustly.

Problem and Purpose Statement

The problem surrounding this research is there is little data which explores the perceptions of teachers' values surrounding play and storytelling and the impact those values have on their teaching philosophy (Eberle, 2014; Hunkin, 2014; Overstreet, 2018; Wohlwend, 2008). The purpose of this study is to look at how the perceptions of pre- and in-service teachers change regarding play and storytelling after participating in a play and inquiry practicum. By changing teachers' perceptions surrounding play, we create better classrooms for our children; Teachers become better informed on developmentally appropriate practices, more intentional in their approach, and, ultimately, provide better outcomes for their children (Hunkin, 2014; Wohlwend & Peppler, 2015). In an attempt to discover this connection, this study aims to explore the following research questions:

1. How are the perceptions of pre- and in-service early childhood teachers regarding play and storytelling influenced as a result of participation in a play and inquiry practicum?
2. How does this change of pre- and in-service early childhood teachers' perceptions regarding play and storytelling shift their teaching philosophy and/or intended practices as a result of this participation?

Definition of Terms

The definitions of the following terms will be used throughout this manuscript:

1. Play: A variety of definitions of the word play currently exist. Two specific definitions have informed my definition of play for purposes of this study. According to Goncu et al. (2007), "play means different things to different people based on personal experiences,

contextual relevance to culture, place and time and positioning within shifting theoretical discourses" (as cited in Leggett & Newman, 2017, p. 29). Eberle (2014) suggests that play "is an ancient, voluntary, 'emergent' process driven by pleasure that yet strengthens our muscles, instructs our social skills, tempers and deepens our positive emotions, and enables a state of balance that leaves us poised to play some more" (p. 231). For the purposes of this study, play is defined as child-centered, open-ended activities, initiated by the child for their own enjoyment (Vygotsky, 1978).

2. Storytelling: Storytelling is *play* in written form – the verbatim sequence of character and plot as it is unfolded in the classroom (Paley, 1979). It is "a shared process, a primary cultural institution, the art of social language" (Paley, 1990, p. 23).
3. Teacher Perceptions/Beliefs: According to Evans et al. (2004), beliefs are "knowledge or ideas accepted by an individual as true or as probable" (p. 303). Teacher perceptions and/or beliefs, according to Charlesworth and colleagues (1991) "can be described as what [teachers] think, know, and assume about how preschool children develop…how they view their roles in this process, and how they want to create a classroom…" (as cited in Jin & Moran, 2021, p. 505) that nurtures this.

Review of the Literature

What is this phenomenon of play? And how are teachers' perceptions of play impacting their approach in the classroom? Is play truly valuable? And if so, how do we educate pre- and in-service teachers on its value? Even still, are teachers willing to advocate for play in their own classroom? Will they forego teacher-driven curriculum, in an effort to meet the child where they are? Is it possible? Is it feasible? Is it necessary? This chapter will explore the phenomenon of play, beginning first with an introduction of play theory.

What Play is *Not*

Let us first begin by addressing what play is *not.* There are many classically trained teachers who take a more teacher-directed stance on education, even in the earliest of years. These beliefs are rooted in classical theory, fathered by philosopher Mortimer Adler (1988). They are reformed in their approach, believing that learning itself should be *painful*:

> One of the reasons why the education given by our schools is so frothy and vapid is that the American people generally—the parent even more than the teacher—wish childhood to be unspoiled by pain. Childhood must be a period of delight, of gay indulgence in impulses. It must be given every avenue for unimpeded expression, which of course is pleasant; and it must not be made to suffer the impositions of discipline or the exactions of duty, which of course are painful. *Childhood must be filled with as much play and as little work as possible* [emphasis added]. What cannot be accomplished educationally through elaborate schemes devised to make learning an exciting game must, of necessity, be forgone. Heaven forbid that learning should ever take on the character of a serious occupation—just as serious as earning money, and perhaps, much more laborious and

> painful. The kindergarten spirit of playing at education pervades our colleges. (Adler & Van Doren, 1988, p. 34)

It is necessary to point out Adler's (1988) *separation* of play and work – as if there is no interplay between the two. It is clear from this text, that Adler (1988) and other classically trained teachers, see play and work as two separate, and even conflicting, realms of thought, rather than viewing play *as the work* of young children. Understanding the distinction made here is foundational to one coming to understand the value of play, as championed by Vygotsky (1978), and other like theorists (Bakhtin, 1981; Dewey, 1990; Erikson, 1993; Paley, 1979-2014; Piaget & Inhelder, 1972).

Theoretical Framework of Play

It is critical in the understanding of this research to first recognize these champions of play as social constructivists. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), "in social constructivism individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work" (p. 24). In this realm of thought, researchers derive meanings based on their personal experiences – these experiences, of which, have been centered on the phenomenon. They focus on a multitude of views, a complexity of views, rather than a narrowed lens in which to study. Social constructivists rely heavily on the participants' views of the phenomenon, and negotiate these meanings through a shared process as a participatory observer; "…they are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through interaction with others (hence social construction) and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 24). Theories are inductively developed throughout the process of research; connections are made, patterns are drawn, and meaning is interpreted. Therefore, the interpretive framework guiding this study is social constructivism.

The conceptual framework for this study is broadly defined as constructivism. Combining the educational theories of many play-theorists, one can come to understand the value of play and the meaning derived by the close observation of it (Dewey, 1990; Erikson, 1993; Piaget & Inhelder, 1972; Vygotsky, 1978). This research is situated within Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory with the assumption that our environment and experiences impact our worldview. Figure 2-1 is a visual representation of the process of a teacher's perception of play. To understand this perception, we must first realize the influences of their environment and experiences, and how those factors help shape their understanding of play.

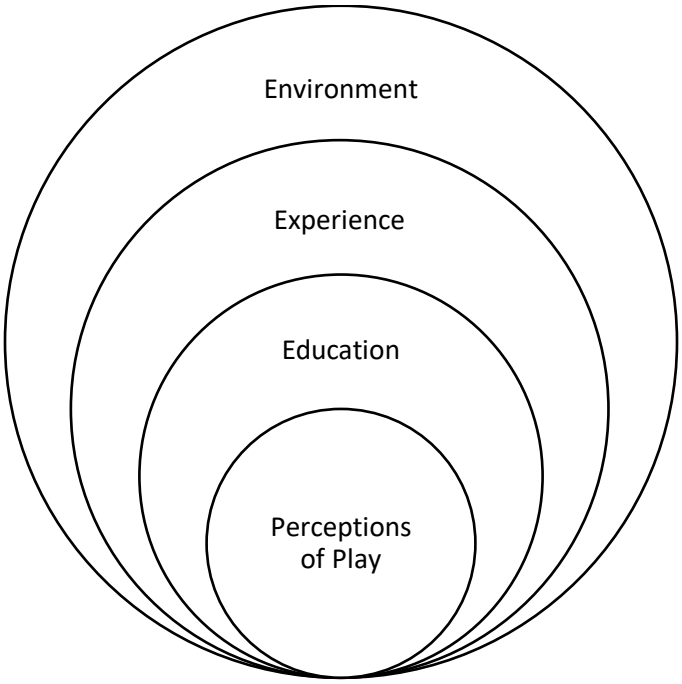

Figure 2-1. *Theoretical Framework*

Understanding Paley: A Review of her Literature, Methodologies, and Contribution to the Field as a Teacher-Researcher

Given the nature of this study and the emphasis placed on play and storytelling, it is necessary to develop a solid understanding of Vivian Paley (1979-2014) including a historical

look at her work (noting especially her changes in perceptions of children's play), her methods, and the contribution she has made to the field of early childhood education.

White Teacher

Vivian Paley (1979) saw herself as the catalyst of change in her classroom. Whether she was speaking up for those who were shy (Mitchell), those who were different (Sylvia), or those who may have had certain prejudices against them (e.g., "the black girls"). However, it did not take long for her to realize that the children play a bigger role in combating systemic racism than she originally thought. She observed her (somewhat) diverse classroom, carefully noting the interactions of the children and the nuances within their relationships. She identified with children who were on the outskirts of the classroom, as she once felt the same isolation as a young Jewish child. She noted the differences amongst her children – how some differences kept the children apart and how some differences brought the children together. She described an unlikely friendship between a quiet, calm white boy and a rambunctious black boy by noting their complimentary personalities, their struggles together and their ultimate bond. She described cliques that were formed in the doll corner – cliques defined somewhat by race, and also by personalities, dialect, and a certain comfort level of play. She noted the differences between the "black girls" and the others (who she mentions by name) in both their type of play in the doll corner and their level of comfort with one another. She is intrigued by Jim Crow doll corners, a natural division of the young girls, but does not find such a divide amongst the boys, perhaps because so much of their play is physical. She observed that (to her surprise) white children *behaved better* when playing with black children and that the reverse was also true.

She cross checked herself time and time again, noting her own biases and prejudices while also reflecting on the feedback from some of her peers. She noticed "black cliques" that

were formed, but failed to recognize when it occurred naturally with other children; she wondered if these bonds may be based on something more than just race. She noted the way that black children spoke and played (as well as their content of play) and found herself making subtle comparisons to the play of other children. She sought "explanations and labels, but the complexities of human behavior [defeated her] every attempt at making generalizations" (Paley, 1979, p. 127). She often found herself apologizing for jumping to conclusions, taking light of issues that were serious, and misinterpreting intentions behind actions. There was an honesty about her own insecurities, her own biases, and prejudices not only with the black children, but with all of her children. She seemed, at times, happy with her decision to teach in an integrated school, yet ill-equipped in some ways to speak to the diversity in her classroom. She acknowledged her attempts to not see color rather than embracing it as a positive and interesting difference (as one of her parents would teach her). She does not claim to have figured it out. Rather, she acknowledged her understanding of race, and the impact it had in her classroom, as a learning process. She recognized her own hesitation when speaking about race or even family dysfunction, suggesting that her own silence may convey the message that there might be something wrong with being different. In fact, she applauded one of her children for coming forward to speak of their uncertainties at home, which opened up the door for another child to speak out. She noted that these types of opportunities help young children connect to their diverse peers, to see them as human, and not so different after all. She observed her children in play and came to see them as uniquely human; They were different *in a positive way*. Paley (1979) was fair-minded and justice oriented; she was a change agent of her time.

Wally's Stories

Vivian Paley (1981) was a keen observer of young children. She spent her time in the classroom as a teacher-researcher. She listened to the children's conversations, articulated their play, and collected their stories. She focused intentionally on the language development that occurred throughout the kindergarten year. She believed that once a child "…learn[ed] a language well enough, and *before* he is told he cannot invent the world, he will explain everything" (Paley, 1981, p. 31). She explored the intersection of play and story writing, noting the nuances between the children's fantasy and their reality. She followed their interest in magic, its uses, its limitations, its persona (e.g., fairies, God, magicians, etc.). She was intrigued by their concept of wishing, and found that, despite popular belief, wishes have rules and limitations. She found that there was such a thing as *too much wishing* – that fairies, like adults, can become pestered by over asking – thus children must learn to control their impulses to wish for more than within reason. As she observed her children, she found that wishes could correct reality; they could serve as an alternate reality. In fact, they could even *become* reality if the child believed it to be so. After tantalizing the children with a story of a valentine fairy, she found that her children, even after discovering the truth, still wished to believe in the magic of the fairy. They believed so certainly that it was as if they meant to say, "we wished it had happened this way" (Paley, 1981, p. 155). She found that "faith and principle [were] deliberately intertwined," and that separating those realities would be challenging: "Let's pretend, they say, that this is what actually happened. If we pretend, maybe it will become what happened" (Paley, 1981, p. 142).

She found interesting divisions between fairies, magicians, and God. Fairies and God being more-or-less the same; they were intended to bring peace, justice, and harmony to the world. Magicians, conversely, were more like humans; they were capable of error, sneaky, and

less likely to be trusted. She was intrigued by how the children defined their magical beings, and how they integrated them into their stories; they were used to bring order, to solve problems, to answer questions, and to bring pleasant surprises. She found that these beings could even answer unsolved mysteries – noting *magicians in disguise* as the coverup for any mysterious death in the children's play. She observed the similarities of play and storytelling, as well as their differences. Both, she believed, were intended to help children work through reality, whether by magic or practice. However, storytelling, unlike play, had a more certain outcome; in storytelling, order would always be restored. She found that "the printed story, whether by an adult or a child, promise[d] dependability. The soldier [would] always kill the witch; the lost child [would] invariably find his parents; everyone [would] live happily ever after" (Paley, 1981, p. 122). There were very few exceptions to this rule, one being the story of Hansel and Gretel; it was a story of magic, she found, but it was too uncertain for the children to accept. Magic, they believed, is only good if it can offer protection. In instances like this, she found that the children would attempt to rewrite the story in an effort to make sense of it.

She considered herself to play a small, but significant role in the classroom; rather than directly impose herself into the situation, she would step back, watch, and wait. On a number of occasions, she made an attempt to guide children's thinking toward certain outcomes (whether it was measuring the rug, counting apples, or exchanging dollars for quarters), but to no avail. Instead, she found that the children had a better understanding by coming to conclusions in their own way. She went on to suggest that learning was an evolutionary process and argued that "…adults should not underestimate the young child's tendency to revert to earlier thinking; [that] new concepts have not been 'learned' but are only in temporary custody. They are glimpsed and tried out but are not permanent possessions" (Paley, 1981, p. 101). She understood her children

by keenly listening; intentionally waiting, stepping in only on occasion to help the children think through their play (and to help deepen her own understanding of their thinking). She was intentionally passive in her methods, but at the same time *so intrigued* by her children that she could not help but jump in and see what would happen next. Her passion is inspirational. Her dedication is unmatched.

Her collection of the children's dialogue offers insight into the growth and development that occurs in the kindergarten year. Play is how children cope with change at home, become familiar with the unknown, overcome that which frightens them (Paley, 1981). It is their lived experience. And we, the teachers, are privileged enough to be able to observe it first-hand.

Boys and Girls

In a day and age where many teachers refuse to see the boys and girls as anything other than children, Vivian Paley (2014) appreciated them for their separateness. She took look at her own gender biases, her typecasting in play, in storytelling, and even in fairytales. Her keen observation of young boys and girls showcased their individual preferences; their femininity and masculinity in the ways of which they interacted with their environment and with one another. She observed their strong opposition to including the opposing sex into their play (with, of course, exceptions in certain scenarios – e.g., playing *the Daddy* in the doll corner). She attempted to divide the room by sex, offering only certain activities to certain groups of children at times throughout the day. She gave the children the opportunity to attend special area classes separately; she read stories to them separately; she allowed them to run on the racetrack separately, all the while noting their subtle differences. She considered whether having mixed groups inhibited the girls from learning how to build constructively, think abstractly, and develop physically (without the fear of being run over by the boys); she wondered whether

young boys would take greater risks at the art table or in dramatic play, if the girls were not so possessive of those spaces. Admittedly, she was "…almost fooled into believing [the children didn't] need each other" (Paley, 2014, p. 37). She wondered if the children would seize any opportunities to identify as distinctly feminine or masculine, musing ideas such as "*if I am doing something only boys do, then I must be a boy"* (Paley, 2014, p. 18). However, after coming to observe them in such separate play worlds, she discovered how deeply their connection lies.

Were the boys *stealing* or were the girls *not sharing*? She resonated on this thought and came to find that the separation of robbers from the doll corner stemmed from a need for *the fantasy to be preserved*, not merely to avoid conflict. She wondered if "the intrusion by males and the expulsion by females might be a necessary ritual" (Paley, 2014, p. 89). She attempted to blend the two spheres by moving the doll corner closer to the block area. When that plan failed, she removed the furniture altogether in an effort to engage the girls in constructive play. If they had nothing to start with, she wondered, would they learn to *create* their own fantasy world? Instead, she found the girls in the block area playing pretend with mommy, daddy, and baby zoo animals; She found that without a doll corner, the girls would just create another world. The play would remain. The mommy would continue to love the baby, all the while the robberies would still occur.

She admitted her own biases against boy play: the rough and tumble, need for physical contact, loud, raucous play. She observed that her "…own measure of contentment and anxiety follow[ed] close[ly] upon the mood of the boys" (Paley, 2014, p. 7). However, she found that the girls' play exhibited similar characteristics: they would run about as kittens, meowing, screeching, and causing a stir. Yet, she would rarely intervene. She observed the boys and found that underneath their superhero capes, they were looking for protection – they were in need of a

strong protagonist to identify with. Their insecurities were as sure as the girls, but they would not allow themselves to become vulnerable. She watched them as they took on motherly roles with a baby robot. She watched them use *pretend* to "…disarm and enchant..." finding that play "…suggests heroic possibilities for making changes, just as in the fairy tales" (Paley, 2014, p. 87). She admitted her own uneasiness with gun play (especially indoors) yet could not really reason why. She was comfortable with other types of taboo play (e.g., death) as children would often use such ideas to work through real life, noting that "the same magic destroys and resurrects…" (Paley, 2014, p. 80). It is her perspective as the teacher that must change, she realized, not the children's content of play. She wrestled with this theme time and time again and found herself wavering between what *looked respectable*, what was best for the children. She vacillated continually between wanting to have control of her classroom, and wanting to watch and see what would unfold; she was caught between good appearances and good stories, admitting that she had come to enjoy the characters and plot more than she could ever "…admire a quiet room" (Paley, 2014, p. 116).

Paley's ability to see differences in young children is refreshing in a society that tends to see everyone as one-in-the-same; a society that neglects to see color, or gender, or even preferences; a society with an approach to education that benefits *most,* but not *all.* Paley's (2014) own hesitations in her classroom point out the advantage that young girls have in school – simply because they are more interested in sitting and working than are young boys. She warns "…the habit of excluding school from play has repercussions for many boys, who begin to think they are not good at schoolwork" (Paley, 2014, p. 103), admitting even that her own approach to the classroom is better suited for young girls. Her own self-reflection, as a teacher, is

inspirational to those of us who want to offer a more inclusive classroom for *all* young learners, and begs the question: what can be done?

Mollie is Three

Vivian Paley (1986) is continuously evaluating her role in the classroom, not as the director, but as the commentator. The children invent; she transcribes. The children lead; she follows. She observed a young group of children throughout the year, noting their development, paying special attention to their problem-solving capabilities. She believed that problem-solving best developed within the context of social fantasy play. Here, "the premises can be controlled, the rules agreed upon, and the outcome evaluated with some degree of objectivity" (Paley, 1986, p. 137). She wondered what the children were thinking as they played and found that the best growth occurred when children were paired with older, more experienced peers (not unlike the theory of Lev Vygotsky, 1978). In this book we see the zone of proximal development time and time again as the children listen to the language of others and come to understand it in context. We witness two young children (Mollie and Christopher) who grow together, understand each other, and learn from each other throughout the course of the year. Both children exhibit interesting dichotomies, being both mature and immature in their play at the same time. Molly understood Christopher despite the impatience the rest of the class had for his mannerisms. She "…accept[ed] his differences as style, not deficiency, and play[ed] along with confusing behavior until it [became] more familiar" (Paley, 1986, p. 34) By observing the children, Paley (1986) comes to understand that "enigmas are unraveled by pretending they are something else." (p. 34). As always, Paley (1986) collected their stories, noting that most stories "…lie somewhere between the compulsory and the accidental. They refer to scenes that are not overwhelming but need to be played out again" (p. 61). She found that the children used

storytelling as a construct for social development, vacillating somewhere between being a solitary storyteller and using storytelling as social security; those who invite others into their stories not only accept comrades as friends, but expect the same in return.

She was bewildered by her lack of influence on the children, noting that the power of questioning goes to the questioner, and not to what was being asked. She found that the children were not always able to discern the teacher's role in fantasy play. They seemed to believe that she could read minds. They questioned her motives, yet rarely attempted to question the motives of other children. Nonsense to us made perfect sense to them. She relearned this lesson a number of times throughout the book, as children became better teachers to each other than Paley (1986) could ever hope to be. Her many attempts at questioning children, intriguing them with riddles, and engaging them in conversation fall flat, as the children learn to negotiate their roles through play. She found that "in fantasy play you are as large as the requirements of the role you play. It is not size that matters, but only how creatively you play your part" (Paley, 1986, p. 126). The children are aware of their relation to the environment and with others; it is the teacher who is sometimes uncomfortable with the situation. Admittedly, the bad guy play concerns her at times, but did not seem to concern the other children. The children knew how to navigate between *real* pretend and *pretend* pretend. Adults were quick to label such behaviors, such as good guys and bad guys; children, on the other hand, understood them as one in the same. They knew what it felt like to be a good guy *pretending* to be a bad guy; they could relate. The children come to understand their world through the many different roles they play. "[They could] better explain… behavior as a character portrayal than in terms of classroom rules" (Paley, 1986, p. 11). Paley (1986) found that when her focus was more on the unraveling of characters and plot, rather than behavior and disruption, the quality of the children's play advanced. Paley (1986)

believed that the two most powerful forces in the kindergarten classroom were *friendship* and *fantasy*, and that children elicited their highest responses when these two incentives were given or withheld from other children. Most importantly, perhaps, she found that play was highly social; it was rule-governed and logical, and "…the process of determining how the play goes [was] often more important than the play itself" (Paley, 1986, p. 17).

Paley's (1986) continual assessment of her classroom is inspiring – her unique perspective offers us insight into why children play the way that they do. Through her observations we find that the children use fantasy to work through everyday life. Play helps them come to grips with their struggles, their triumphs, their fears, and the even the unknown. We come to understand them in their truest form by observing them in this rich fantasy play. We come to find that storytelling *is* play in a tangible form. It gives words to the children's lived experience. Words that we can reflect on; words that we can learn from, if we would only take the time to stop and listen. Paley (1986) believed, "learning [to be] a reciprocal process…" (p. 32). That is, the children have as much to teach us as they have to learn.

Bad Guys Don't Have Birthdays

"I pretend, therefore I am. I pretend, therefore I know" (Paley, 1988, p. viii). It has become clear throughout Paley's (1988) writings that her understanding of social fantasy play is of the highest regard. Her somewhat Vygotskian (1978) approach to the classroom has left us longing for more – more time uninterrupted for play, more time for listening, more time for story collection. She observed that year after year, the children's play was centered on the same truths; ideas must be processed; children must come to understand *what is* through play. The children, she found, understood each other on a completely different level, and *their* understanding of a

concept mattered more, at times, than the universal truth. They worked through these understandings, both simple and complex, in storytelling.

Early on in her teaching career, Paley (1988) admitted to seeking only correct answers as evidence of her success in the classroom. She later came to discover that the distractions of the children were actually the *sounds of their thinking*. She observed other teachers in the field, and watched their genuine interest unfold with excitement at the children's conversations; they were intrigued by what the children said and what they wondered about. She envied that passion within them and sought to discover it for herself. She found the tape-recorder to be her constant companion; the recording and replaying of the children's conversations and stories helped her understand where they were in their thinking; it helped her clarify her misconceptions. Paley (1988) came to find that her:

> …notebooks [had] begun to fill with words of a new group of visionaries who [had] only recently discovered that they [could] surround their uncertainties and confusions with enough persuasive commentary to make the worry of the moment appear under control. (p. 5)

Fantasy play, she realized, was an attempt to overcome that which makes us feel uncertain or uncomfortable. The bad guy play inherent in little boy culture was nothing more than an attempt to work out life's challenges. She found that the presence of a bad guy redefined the purpose of play. For the boys, the addition of a bad guy extended the play; the girls, on the other hand, saw him as an obstruction; he must be eliminated or used to eliminate other hindrances in life (e.g., an unruly older sister). She learned that when children found themselves in the midst of conflict, they possessed the uncanny ability to resolve it through fantasy. The play continued, and the conflict was simply part of the drama. She discovered that "…bad days often have a sobering

effect...Magically, problems are gotten rid of in the course of creating them. The anger, the explosion, and the guilt clear the air for new beginnings" (Paley, 1988, p. 87). She attempted, at times, to intervene and found that by interjecting her own morality tales, she interrupted the play. She confessed her faults in not taking the time to understand what the children were playing and how their characters were impacted by the plot. She comes to find that "in play…the principle of compromise begins to represent a higher order of behavior to the children themselves. [The children have] a number of options under their control" (Paley, 1988, p. 82).

She found that the children used pretend to conquer fear; by pretending not to be afraid, they were able to acquire a certain bravery. If you believed something long enough, she found, you would assume it to be true. She observed that "if a fear [could not] be avoided, the children… [would] make it the central issue, let it surface and explode. [They would] act out the ominous feelings so the play [could] continue" (Paley, 1988, p. 25). By watching her children work through fear, she came to understand their many uncertainties, confusions, and themes of play. She observed them as they worked through life and death, good and evil, parent and child, and realized no moment of play was taken for granted. The children were at work. They were coming to understand their world, for better and for worse. And she was dictating their every word as it unfolded. "How easy, in play, to disguise the feelings represented by the actions. The more [we] listen, the more the play seems motivated by that which cannot be discussed" (Paley, 1988, p. 45).

Paley (1988) was continually impressed by the children's use of play. She found that children, despite coming to grips with their own limitations, could make sense of their world by learning to control the outcomes in fantasy. She applauded their courage, their use of magic, and their intuitive thinking in attempting to create order in the midst of chaos, to make sense out of

confusion. She faced her own misconceptions of social fantasy play and admitted her shortcomings and unfair assumptions about the players and the game. She was, admittedly, a work in progress – and there is much to learn from her changing perspective.

The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter

Vivian Paley (1990) continued to champion her children's play – this time observing carefully the outliers. Through her brilliant annotations, we come to understand how young children on the fringes of society become included – how a classroom divided becomes inclusive. To Paley (1990), a classroom designed around storytelling forgoes the need to label its students. She found that "these labels don't describe the imagination…a storyteller is always in the strongest position; to be known by his or her stories puts the child in the most favorable light" (Paley, 1990, p. 54). She mentioned a child in her classroom, Jason, who might have been given such a label. He did not play well with other children; he insisted on playing the same game with himself day after day; he hardly spoke, and when he did it was only ever about his helicopter. Rather than using these peculiarities against the child, Paley (1990) found a way to include Jason naturally, in his own time, through storytelling. In her observations, she was able to make an interesting connection between Jason and his helicopter. Paley (1990) found that although Jason knew that he was distinct from his helicopter, in times of anxiety and pressure, the two became inseparable. This identity that Jason found helped him to cope in new and challenging circumstances, which made it extremely difficult for him to pretend to be anything else. To Jason, in those moments, he was a helicopter; he was not *pretending* to be a helicopter. To separate a child from their secure identity, Paley (1990) believed, was to separate them from their purpose in the world. Although Jason's play may have at first seemed to isolate the child, it became clear upon further observation that it actually established a sense of unity in the

classroom. His role in the classroom was to be the helicopter; no one else could fill this void. Without this role, not only would Jason be lost, but the whole class would fall into dissonance. He was an essential player.

Paley's (1990) use of storytelling offers several insights for the classroom. She found that "in storytelling, as in play, the social interactions we call interruptions usually improve the narrative" (Paley, 1990, p. 23). The other children know that the child who interrupts does it because he has to. The other children watch "…and especially, they watch the teacher to see if that unsettled child is safe from harm. That's all they want to know" (Paley, 1990, p. 53). Paley (1990) found that children want to know that they are accepted in the group no matter how difficult or different they are. Further, she found that when we discourage participation in storytelling, we neglect to see what is unfolding before us. Storytelling is "a shared process, a primary cultural institution, the art of social language" (Paley, 1990, p. 23). Though teachers typically see interruptions as a hindrance, the children, we learn, see interruptions as a genuine interest to the plot that is developing. In a sense, their curiosity serves as a compliment. As storytelling develops into playwriting, disruptions may even evolve as authors begin to consider the interests of their friends to fulfil character roles. For example, whenever a child wanted Jason to take part in their play, they created a plot that needed a helicopter. The roles that the children played were essential for the whole group. The children know this; it is up to us to kindle that fire.

Paley (1990) came to find how much interplay occurred between the children's stories and fantasy play. So much so, in fact, that it became difficult to know when the play ended, and the story began. She observed that "stories that were not acted out were fleeting dreams: private fantasies, disconnected and unexamined" (Paley, 1990, p. 25). Stories that came to fruition, she

found, were solidified; they brought social contexts to the surface so that children could deepen their understanding. The process of analyzing a story and acting it out gave children the opportunity to learn in a way that was authentic and meaningful to them. She observed the tremendous growth that occurred within her classroom by following Jason's development throughout the year. She noted his early struggles (e.g., being only able to break and fix his helicopter) and applauded his courage as he learned to interact with the play of other children. In a sense, she watched him discover *how to play* through his close observation of his more experienced peers. Yet again, we draw parallels between Paley's (1990) and Vygotsky's (1978) approach. By observing expert players, Jason comes to understand that children are the controllers of fantasy, not the contrary. She scaffolded the children's understanding, finding it "…almost impossible to explain something effectively to a child without using an image that has come from the child" (Paley, 1990, p. 243). She learned how to speak their language, and, by doing so, how to create an environment that was inclusive of all learners.

You Can't Say You Can't Play

You can't say you can't play has become, perhaps, Vivian's Paley's (1992) biggest contribution to the field of early childhood education. This rule, grappled with and put into effect throughout a documented academic year, has become common practice in many classrooms today. This concept of inclusion which started out as an experiment to Paley (1992) has become a mantra to many teachers in the field. This idea of play-inclusion has caused some controversy in the field of early childhood education; is it ethical, that is, to give children autonomy over friendships and fantasy? Or is it exclusive? By looking at the context of why the rule was put into place, we can come to understand Paley's (1992) intentions. This was not merely a ploy to bring in the outsiders; it was a plea to create an environment which fosters inclusivity. Paley

(1992) admitted to feeling like such an outsider in her early years, recalling images of more favored students, as well as those who were on the outskirts of social life. Her theory stemmed from the idea that play is practice for real life; therefore, if we exclude in play, what are we teaching our children? These ideas, she found, would be considered unforgivable if spoken by an adult, but in the classroom, we are unsure of how to respond. Is it the child's right to be able to have play preferences? What if those preferences are at the expense of other children?

She focused a great deal of time on exclusion in play, identifying with those who were left out time and time again, noting that the same children were the ones who took on the burden of exclusion. She wondered if those same children who had become the outsiders in their own classroom might grow up to live as outsiders in society. Without this solid social foundation, she questioned, would they be able to reach their fullest potential? She comes to find that "…exclusion is written into the game of play. And play, as we know it, [would] soon be the game of life" (Paley, 1992, p. 20). She struggled to understand where this exclusion was stemming from; was it a natural part of the process? If the children valued friendship over fairness, she wondered, would they exclude others to preserve the relationship of a close friend? Why was this the case? She learned that even when children were confronted with these ideas they would sympathize, but could not fully appreciate the nature of the rule. Instead, they looked for the "…least hurtful way of rejecting someone else. [However] it [would] not occur to them that rejection itself [was] the problem" (Paley, 1992, p. 47). Were some children destined to play on the fringes of groups while others take control of fantasy play? Does it come down to personality? Loyalty? Confidence? She wondered if some children were simply different, but comes to find that they are not. "What makes them outsiders [was] simply that they [were]

treated as outsiders" (Paley, 1992, p. 68). This was an issue that must be resolved, and as always, Paley (1992) followed the lead of her children in how to resolve it.

She questioned her own children, as well as older children in the school with the intentions behind the rule and received a mix of responses. The outsiders, feeling validated, typically fell in favor of the new rule, while prime players felt oppressed by it. She found through these conversations that some children manipulate play; they used it for social advantage. The older girls openly admitted to being meaner than (and envious, at times of) the boys. Their divisive play was obvious to all who observed it. They felt the rule would be a good idea for Kindergarteners, but it was far too late for them; their social standing had been etched in stone. Paley (1992) vacillated between what was right and wrong, fair and unfair, and determined, finally, to implement the new standard of play. It was accepted, hesitantly at first, but also wholeheartedly. The children (and teachers!) were almost relieved to have such a rule to fall back on; it took one more burden of decision off of their chests. She compared the sensation to her early years of teaching, when she gave up the timeout chair completely, referring to both as *escapes from a trap.*

What was most interesting, perhaps, was the effect the rule had on her unique method of storytelling (one that I have come to deeply appreciate over the years). In classrooms prior, children were able to dictate stories with certain actors in mind; they used storytelling as social security, as Paley (1992) put it (e.g., if you put me in your story, I'll put you in mine). However, Paley (1992) found it hard to enforce inclusivity in play without also enforcing it in all other aspects of the classroom. While the children were reluctant at first (some even refusing to tell stories for a few days), all came to embrace the new idea wholeheartedly. She found the children taking on new, even implausible, roles that they would have never considered previously; they

were freed, in a sense, without the added pressure of having to always confirm or be confirmed by their peers. They were liberated to think and act freely.

Throughout her journey, she found that "we must be told, when we are young, what rules to live by. The grownups must tell the children early in life so that myth and morality proclaim the same message while the children are still listening" (Paley, 1992, p. 110). In this rare instance, we see Paley (1992) take on the role of direct-teacher, rather than following the wishes of the children – wishes that she feels would be exclusive of others.

Kwanza and Me

Paley (1979) wrote of her hesitation about race relations in White Teacher; sixteen years later, we see her teacher-researcher heart still seeking answers. In an attempt to confront racism directly, Vivian Paley (1995) did what she knew best, she collected stories. However, unlike what she had done in previous years, this time she relied primarily on adult dialogue (particularly on the stories and conversations that happened with parents and other colleagues). She observed that "…we seem to achieve community… in the telling of our stories and the solving of our social problems. [And that] often the two go together…" (Paley, 1995, p. 67).

She was surprised, time and time again, at the accusations made about her school in terms of race equality and came to find that many black families were concerned about their child's future in an integrated school; they wondered if an all-black educational experience would better set their children up for success. They felt that their children might become isolated, or even worse, tokenized without a strong black community surrounding them. Through her many conversations, Paley (1995) learned that the community was the child's strength. With a solid foundation at home, the child would be better prepared to handle the ups and downs of the classroom. Interestingly, she found that other minority groups (e.g., in her particular classroom

Indian and Asian families) did not share the same sentiments; they preferred their children to learn alongside white children, and felt that they benefitted from such integration. She studied the idea of inclusion (e.g., children with learning needs who had become fully included in the typical classroom) and was intrigued by the children's ability to learn alongside one another when competition was off the table. She was appalled at this habit of exclusion, and observed it across a variety of circumstances (e.g., children who were brighter, more privileged, or had more access to wealth or resources). In this mindset, the children became pitted against each other; there was discordance within the classroom. She came to find that it was this "…habit of bias [that was] our common vulnerability" (Paley, 1995, p. 113).

She struggled with the idea of homogeneity in her classroom and wondered what role she played in race relations. She wavered between wanting to be color blind or trying to confront color directly; to celebrate differences as part of her curriculum or to pretend those difference did not exist. She questioned whether such homogeneity truly existed in the classroom or if it was only in the "…perception of the beholder" (Paley, 1995, p. 112). She came to find that if teachers would assume the role of "…integrators, we would be better at identifying the 'minorities' built into any group, those who act, feel, look, think, or learn differently. Then [she believed] each child's special attributes could be included in the common culture" (Paley, 1995, p. 112). If we were intentional in our approach, every child could achieve a better outcome. She found that our strengths were not in our commonalities, but in our differences. No one grows without challenge; "…No one paints the same picture, tells the same story, or invents the same idea" (Paley, 1995, p. 112). Our richness of diversity is our curriculum's strength. It has as much to teach the children (and teachers!) than any lesson that could be planned, perhaps even more so; "and some

day, when nonconformity itself becomes the tradition, our children and we ourselves will be ready to accept as a matter of course the many images of humankind" (Paley, 1995, p. 107).

She found that there were many schools of thought on the subject and no one person's perspective was better than another's. We could learn from everyone, if we would only stop and listen. She was inspired by this "… new thrust of energetic idealism…" (Paley, 1995, p. 114) evident in so many schoolteacher's classrooms. She came to find that teachers were becoming more culturally responsive in their classrooms; they were seeking out ways to bring equity, justice, and opportunity to their students. It became a personal burden, in a sense. Paley (1995) believed that it was not necessarily about coming to agreement, or about finding all the right answers; it was about opening the doors for an honest discussion, listening to each other, learning, and growing together. What then is the teacher's role in all of this? To listen, perhaps. And to become a safe haven for our students.

The Girl With the Brown Crayon

During this particular school year, Vivian Paley (1997) and her children embarked on an unexpected journey through Leo Lionni's picture books – reading, studying, analyzing, memorize their words, acting on them, and reflecting their ideas through art and discussion. They connected to his characters, both new and familiar, and looked for common themes, threads that would weave his ideas together. They searched for ways to connect with the text. They came to appreciate his characters, their underlying messages, and the significance they brought to the classroom culture. The children came to terms with the fact that many of Lionni's characters were treated unfairly, yet they were able to find compassion. The children connected with the characters in different ways and used their stories to express themselves.

Throughout their work, they found commonalities between a less than confident Polish child (Walter) and Pezzettino, both believing themselves to be inadequate. Paley (1997) found herself critiquing the actions of the characters in such a story and their exclusion of a character simply because of his differences. Her realization caused her to observe the child in the midst of his peers, where she was surprised to find him quite at leisure – she wondered if "it must be the teacher who makes him feel inadequate" (Paley, 1997, p. 53). The children, she learned, *needed* Walter. It was with her, she noted, "…that he hesitate[d] and falter[ed]" (Paley, 1997, p. 53). She wondered if "Pezzettino [was] every child who [had] ever walked into a classroom" (Paley, 1997, p. 53). Children who questioned their place in the world and their existence. She wondered if "the lonely island Pezzettino [was] sent to does in fact represent school, where children [were] broken into pieces in order that adults may observe, label, and classify them. And, having been so dissected," she questioned, "how does the child become whole again?" (Paley, 1997, p. 53-54). She questioned whether the motives behind the characters were stemming from a place of virtue. Could Tico not keep his golden wings *and* his friends? Why must he conform to be accepted? Did it come down to jealously? Inferiority? Commonality? How thin a line is drawn between being yourself and being extraordinary? She was confronted with this issue time and time again as her children pushed back.

She was fascinated by the children's acceptance of Frederick (an aloof, poet/artist mouse). They understood his motives despite his faults; they valued what he brought to the table. Rather than assuming Frederick to be indifferent, they believed him to be introspective – always thinking, quiet, and perceptive. She applauded one child's particular journey with the texts (Reeny), who identified with strong characters (e.g., Swimmy – a black fish who rose up and led the red fish, using its differences to its best advantage). She observed her fascination with the

storyline and her consciousness of being a black child in a white school. Reeny, she came to find, understood the motives and actions of children unlike any other child her age. She was aware of their differences, their quirks, and was intrigued by their nonconformity. One such child, Oliver, had been given many labels over the years. However, she found that when he was submerged into Leo Lionni's world, this perspective was shifted to that of a literary role. "He [was] removed from the humdrum of psychological categories and accepted as an artist who concentrate[d] on one thing at a time while we play[ed] the role of audience and supporters. How easily," she believed, "Leo Lionni brings us together" (Paley, 1997, p. 30).

Throughout this journey, she observed that children use stories to "…bring up their deeper feelings and questions" (Paley, 1997, p. 20). Storytellers, she noted, were "…another kind of…hero…bringing an otherwise distracted group of people together for the purpose of being lifted up and carried away on the wings of imagery and language" (Paley, 1997, p. 65). She came to understand this type of literary journey akin to play; that is, a "narrative continuity" (Paley, 1997, p. 74). A way for children to engage, focus, and sustain attention on a collaborative effort; one that was full of complexities and creative thought. She believed that learning through stories (whether read, written, or dramatized) was instinctive in young children, and to foster this curiosity "we need only to give them the proper context in which to demonstrate and fine-tune their natural gifts" (Paley, 1997, p. 86).

Among her findings, Paley (1997) recognized that the children understood each other better than she ever could; they acknowledged their faults, sympathized with their insecurities, and appreciated their differences. They had an uncommonly unique gift to critique the storyline without stripping the characters of their valor. They could read between the lines, unfold hidden messages, and use such imagery to connect to their peers. "[The children] know the difference,"

she finds, “between literary commentary and personal criticism” (Paley, 1997, p. 3). They understood how roles and rules applied to their various characters, as well as the people in their environment, again noting there is much to learn from our children, their stories, and their interpretation of children’s literature if we would only stop and listen. Paley’s (1997) years in the classroom, and her shifts in understanding young children have majorly informed early childhood education as we know it. In the testament of her last year in her classroom, we see this so clearly.

The Kindness of Children

In her early years of retirement Vivian Paley (1999) found herself still seeking after universal truths; truths that lay the foundation of our very existence both inside and outside of the classroom. Were the children innately kind? She wondered. Or were they conditioned toward such kindness? She found herself continually impressed by the unprovoked compassion of children. She was intrigued by their ability to seek the welfare of others, to invite them into their play. It seemed, to her, such a natural and easy process, yet, so difficult, at times, for adults to master. She observed that, “…even the most impulsive child [was] not uncomfortable with awkward mannerisms in others,” and that, “children [were] deeply curious about odd behaviors and [were] seldom offended or worried by them” (Paley, 1999, p. 5). She followed closely the story of one child, Teddy, who, with limited verbal and physical abilities, was embraced wholeheartedly into the children’s play. Though he looked, spoke, and acted differently, he was included, *needed*, in fact, to fulfil certain roles in their stories. “Pretend you’re the puppy,” they [would] say, “and you didn’t learn to walk yet” (Paley, 1999, p. 7). Time and time again she observed with “…renewed clarity the power of this activity that [she] has pursued for so many years, the dramatization of children’s stories” (Paley, 1999, p. 43). These stories, she was

reminded, offered children the opportunity to be collaborators and visionaries; "it [was] akin to offering new life to a wandering soul" (Paley, 1999, p. 43). It was something almost sacred. This idea of something spiritual in the making captivated her. Through reflection and discussion, she found herself vacillating between the idea of such kindness being divine or simply human; feeling herself, though rooted in faith, more humanistic. "'The moral universe rests upon the breath of schoolchildren'" (Paley, 1999, p. 58) – an old saying of the Rabbis became her mantra. Does this assumption rest upon what children *already know*, she wondered, or on what was *instilled in them* (by us, the teachers) in their earliest school days? "If the moral universe takes its shape in the words of the young," she wondered, "then my passion for listening to their words has not been excessive...in fact [it] may have not gone far enough" (Paley, 1999, p. 58). She went on to find herself in alignment with the Rabbis, in search of the same themes; these underlying messages of play and all of its complexities (e.g., threads of compassion, tolerance, and inclusion).

She observed that the children were drawn toward one another. A kindred spirit, almost, hung over the room, causing them to connect with each other through the telling of their stories. She witnessed the children as they confronted their worst fears, failures, and insecurities, noting how other classmates came to their rescue through prose. "'It was always peaceful,'" in their garden, they would tell us, "'and there was never any fighting'" (Paley, 1999, p. 50). Such ideas of comfort were woven throughout the room – examples of compassion richly demonstrated by the youngest members of our society. Throughout her journey, she observed children from diverse backgrounds, both rural and urban, and came to find that their stories were not so different after all. There were still princesses and superheroes, mothers and babies. While the content of their plot may have differed (e.g., wildlife vs. city life) their messages remained the

same: “Someone is alone and a friend comes; someone is in trouble and help is on the way” (Paley, 1999, p. 92).

She learned that children had an “…incredible ability…to create moments of hopefulness for one another, to explain in secret or open ways…that when we are lonely, a friend will come” (Paley, 1999, p. 114). However, even more remarkably than this, she found, storytelling opened doors for children to imagine themselves in a better place and/or in a better light. They could escape to a world of safety and acceptance, a world created by them, *for them.* She understood that storytelling “symbolize[d] something larger and more primary in the universe than merely the sum of its tales” (Paley, 1999, p. 89). It was an open space, a blank canvas, an invitation to create and collaborate. In the midst of these stories, the isolated child becomes included, the quiet child finds his voice, and the meek become heroes and heroines. And though, as she admitted, children were not always kind, they were “…on the edge of kindness, ready and waiting for an opening” (Paley, 1999, p. 89). She witnessed such kindness on the playground, in the classroom, and even In the timeout chair. The children’s keen sensitivities to their classmates’ feelings were remarkable, and frankly, inspirational. If only we, as teachers, could elicit such compassion on those in our midst who need it most. Again, Paley (1999) reminds us to learn from our little ones. Just as the Rabbis did; just as the world should. Her words find us in the midst of a broken society; how desperately we need these lessons today. “What else do [the children] understand that eludes me?” she wondered. “If only I could remain among these children and discover more of what the stories reveal, but it is enough that they will find out the meaning behind the stories, side by side, day after day” (Paley, 1999, p. 107).

In Mrs. Tully's Room

We have followed closely the work of Vivian Paley (2001) in relation to play and storytelling with the preschool- and elementary-aged child. In Mrs. Tully's Room, she explored the story acting of our youngest playwrights, the toddlers. She was captivated both by the similarities and differences between the kindergartener and the two-year-old, most notably intrigued by the toddler's ability to tell a story in a matter of only a few words. "Mama" for instance, a common story, was interpreted by its storytellers in a variety of ways. Some actors held their babies, others fed, pat, or soothed them. The stories were woven together by the same common threads – *you are safe, you are loved, Mama is here.* She was surprised time and time again of the toddler's "ability to bring a character to life and reveal something about themselves at the same time" (Paley, 2001, p. 5). These stories were not only revealing of the individual, but of their community and their culture, as well. Rather than telling stories, she came to find, "they [were] *doing* stories. Doing goes beyond pretending and telling; doing is the final process, or at least the sum of events up to a particular moment" (Paley, 2001, p. 5). This process of doing, she found, must not be rushed. It was, admittedly, hard even for even the most progressive teacher to find time for; yet, as Paley (2001) observed, it was critical for a young child's development. Paley (2001) believed that storytelling was a creative habit which must be honed; without such a habit "how would these subtleties be expressed in such public detail?" she wondered (p. 20). "[While] there are always elements of the individual drama played out at various times all over the classroom" such a powerful interplay could not be conceivable without the practice (and written documentation) of storytelling (Paley, 2001, p. 20). The difference between play and storytelling, she came to understand, was "the difference between a private conversation and a public discussion of personal matters that concern the entire community" (Paley, 2001, p. 21-22).

Time and time again she found herself intrigued by this sense of community in the children's narrative process, finding that "…one [could not] predict which ideas [would] take hold of the children's imaginations and become part of the lingua franca" (Paley, 2001, p. 28). It was a mystery, an evolutionary process of language and literature, and it was catching.

Paley (2001) believed that a community of storytellers was one that was tightly knit. The children knew each other well; they understood their hopes, their fears, their insecurities. They knew what brought joy to their classmates, as well as what made them tick. And within such harmony, she came to find, there was inevitably conflict. Throughout her observation of this classroom, not her own, she recounted similar scenarios of bad-guy play, noting that "most bad-guy scenarios [involved] characters in search of a plot and that the plot itself [seemed] a search for rules to play by" (Paley, 2001, p. 108). She believed that when children were allowed to play long enough, and if teachers could refrain from jumping in too quickly, the children were "usually able to rein in the antiheroes and keep the story going" (Paley, 2001, p. 108). She found that such conflicts "[were] often resolved by the expediency of changing disguises" (Paley, 2001, p. 109). In other words, if a story became too out of hand, it could be replaced by a more appropriate scenario. The children, while navigating these different disguises, were simultaneously working through conflict; though the characters changed, the messages remained the same. Someone who was lost is now found. Someone in trouble has found help. She understood the children's ability to learn *through* storytelling. Characters who misbehaved in stories, for instance, were dealt with; they went to jail, they worked out their problems, they made amends with their classmates. Children in classrooms who misbehaved, however, were often mishandled by the teacher; they were excluded from the group, embarrassed, and frustrated. After years of close observation of the timeout chair and its *victims,* Paley (2001)

came to understand that "one child scorned [was] every child's humiliation" (p. 37). She found such punishment to be painful for *all* to bear, not only for the offending child. When one child hurts, the whole community would hurt. She, instead, placed her faith in her children and their innate goodness to do the right thing *simply because it was the right thing to do*. Such ideas were so vividly represented through the use of storytelling. The children could identify with both characters of their own making, as well characters provided by the teacher. It became the solution to every problem, more powerful than any strategy a teacher could offer. She found that children were "ready to like one another and move on, returning to their activities in a hopeful mood, as though something good had happened" (Paley, 2001, p. 60). Such stories filled the classroom with harmony, and brought the children together.

Paley (2001) encouraged teachers to make time for such rich discussion in their curriculum; to advocate for fantasy play, stories, conversations, and community. She cautions educators who have become so caught up in curriculum to step back and listen to all the little details that are unfolding around them; she calls us to appreciate each child, their background, and their inclination to tell stories. The stories, after all, have much to teach us, as do the children. She asks, "is it possible to spend a lifetime watching the little ones, wondering about everything they say and do?" (Paley, 2001, p. 153). To which her life's work suggests, yes – it is not only possible, but unequivocally necessary.

A Child's Work

Vivian Paley (2004) reminds us time and time again to pause and remember what it was like to be a child; to reflect on the meaning-making that happened when we played; to recall when we used our hands and engaged our hearts and minds equally to solve a problem – back to a time when there were no *correct* answers, only questions, only exploration. She reminds us to

consider when learning was a process that took over our every impulse, when we could not be parted from unearthing certain truths for ourselves; when we used play to solve problems, to make discoveries, to form hypotheses, to take on new roles and equally unfamiliar perspectives. Paley (2004) believed play to be the work of young children, the "…business of deciding who to be and who the others must be and what the environment is to look like and when it is time to change the scene" (p. 2). Further, she believed play to encourage children to take on new perspectives and to accept the perspectives of others, "…while keeping the integrity of the make-believe, the commitment of the other players, and perhaps the loyalty of a best friend" (Paley, 2004, p. 2). She found herself burdened by the new push for academic standards in the kindergarten, a trickle-down effect that has turned the early years into a factory of numbers, letters, and other academic outcomes. This pressure, she believed, caused children to misbehave; it was irrational to Paley (2004) for any play-researcher to force such outcomes on children who were not developmentally ready. We force them to read and write, she believed, rather than instilling in them a love and appreciation of the written word. Children today are asked to adapt to our changing demands. Those who conform are given praise, while those who cannot are given *labels* – though Paley (2004) did not believe in a label that could not be overcome by play. She found herself puzzled by such a conundrum – the evidence was there, the research was there, she found, yet we continue to deny our children the right to play. "…The earlier we begin academics," she suggested, "the more problems are revealed. Were the problems there waiting to be discovered," she wondered, "or does the premature introduction of lessons *cause* the problem?" (Paley, 2004, p. 47). She wrestled with this dilemma as she tried to piece together this puzzle of play, asking questions and seeking answers others ignore or simply do not understand.

She was continually curious why so much play had been robbed of the children and wondered of the detrimental impact it might have on their development. Was it so much the addition of academics that had adversely impacted the children? Or the "time we subtracted from the children's fantasy play that…[made] the difference?" (Paley, 2004, p. 46). Play takes time, true, uninterrupted free time, she suggested. Time for children to set up the scene, allow the plot to unfold, and experiment with different outcomes. Unfortunately, we have "…removed the element – time – that enables play to be effective, then blamed the children when their play skills did not meet our expectations" (Paley, 2004, p. 46). We fault children for their restlessness and constant distraction, yet compound their frustration by imposing rigorous table work. Kindergarten has become the new first grade. As a result, first grade has become second grade. But what of the children who cannot adapt? This idea of "the 'academic kindergarten' was offered as the antidote to boredom," she suggested, "and, further confusing our logic to commonsense, children labeled 'at risk,' who often had less opportunity for play and talk at home, were allowed less time for these activities in school as well" (Paley, 2004, p. 45). Instead of looking at the faults of our methods, she believed, we look at the faults of our children. Rather than meeting them where they are, we look for ways to help them conform. "We no longer wonder 'Who are you?' but instead decide quickly 'What can we do to fix you?" (Paley, 2004, p. 47).

This denial of play, she came to find, not only impacted the child in the early years, but followed them into their academic school years. Without such a solid foundation in fantasy play (skills in problem solving, conversation, relationships, and fluency), children suffered poorer outcomes. The consequences of which were lasting, she warned, "such as bad handwriting, nervousness, stuttering, and, in general, the self-defeating attitudes that often [accompanied] the

too-early introduction of formal lessons" (Paley, 2004, p. 43). In addition, she found that this early push on academics could result in deficits in hand-eye coordination and aural discrimination, at the same time causing the children to be restless, impulsive, unfocused, and even timid toward peers and new challenges. Whereas "the mind that has been freely associating with playful imagery is primed to tackle new ideas" (Paley, 2004, p. 26).

Paley (2004) believed play to be "at the barricades with fewer and fewer teachers willing to step up and defend the natural style and substance of early childhood, the source of all this vocabulary building and image decoding and Socratic questioning" (Paley, 2004, p. 33). Play, once thought to be the pathway to learning, is now considered a hindrance to learning in many academic circles. It is up to us, the teacher-researchers, the ever-questioners, the meaning-makers to find value in this thing we call play. Afterall, it *is* the very important work of young children.

The Boy on the Beach

"Why do children play the way they do?" (Paley, 2010, p. 90). The question has been on Paley's (2010) mind throughout her career, but now, it seems, she has found her answer. In her last book Paley (2010) reminds us what play is all about. She began by observing a small stranger on the beach immersed in solitary play (or so it would seem). Upon a closer examination, she came to find that though he was alone, he was *not playing alone*. He was bargaining with the waves and what seemed to be, perhaps, an imaginary friend. He was directing the stage, allowing the drama to unfold. Was it simply sand and water play, she wondered, or was there something more?

Play, as we have come to understand from Paley (2010) time and time again is anything but; it is a mystery, full of complexities, questions, and curiosities. Paley (2010) can no more accept play as *merely play* than "justify [her] own purposes as merely 'playing around'" (p. 5).

She felt she was on to something, and the children, likewise, must be on to something, as well. She believed that she, like the children, were both "here to create metaphor and find hidden meanings in the moment…[each] looking for the story that [was] ours alone to tell" (Paley, 2010, p. 5). Through her years of research, she found the relationship between the storyteller and the observer to be one of intimacy. The story found its strength in the community – every child had a role to play, and every role was one of necessity. "Together we watch the ways chaos finds a sensible shape. We marvel at the potential of the imagination to find its own questions and seek solutions, knowing that they are temporary and we can return in a new role the next day if we wish" (Paley, 2010, p. 12).

There were two paths of analyzing play, according to Paley (2010)– "we can be guided by the aims and structures of 'play scholarship,' dealing with the theoretical, methodological, and ethical issues in rigorous, experimental ways, adding much value to our knowledge of play" (Paley, 2010, p. xii). Or we can look for the meaning of play "along more dramatic paths, trying to capture the shape and scene before its image is blurred" (Paley, 2010, p. xii) – Paley (2010), naturally, finding herself more in alignment with the latter. Can play be categorized or diagnosed? Can it be put into a box with labels? Some may try, but to no avail. Play, in all of its complexities is beyond the scope and sequence of a curriculum. It cannot be taught, but can it be learned? If superheroes and lost kittens are banished from the classroom, where will they go? How will the children cope with the oddities of life without a stage, and more importantly, how will their stories live on if no one is there to collect them? In these final words of Vivian Paley (2010), we feel this sense of urgency, of community, and what can (and will) be lost without the *work* of young children – the *play* of young children.

"I want to know why children play as they do," she tells us (Paley, 2010, p. 3). In all of her seeking and searching, countless hours of keen observation, precious conversations, and story collection, she has continued to yearn for answers. She noted the subtleties of play, the characteristics of play, the themes of play, yet could not seem to draw concrete conclusions. She was bewildered by this mystery, and happily so. When there were no questions being asked, there are no answers that needed to be found. This practice of hers has captivated early childhood teachers everywhere; it is a *story*, of all things, just waiting to unfold. She often quips that there is much to learn from the children, but I feel it is Paley (2010) who has much to teach us, if we would but stop and listen.

We have witnessed Paley's (2010) journey as a teacher throughout her books. We have watched her grow as an educator, as an observer, and as a teacher-researcher. Here, in her last book, we find ourselves longing for more. More questions and even more question marks; more reason to observe the unknown, to look for clues, hidden treasures, secret messages, themes hidden to the untrained eye. After all her many wonderful years collecting stories both inside and outside of the classroom, she has finally found the answer she has been searching for. "Why do children play the way they do? 'Because we're friends of everybody in the story'" the children tell her; "And when you tell someone your story, that person enters the story and becomes your friend too" (Paley, 2010, p. 90). What a marvelous thing the children call play, what a marvelous thing, indeed.

Comprehensive Review of the Foundational Literature of Play

While Paley (1979-2014) has much to offer in the understanding and defense of children's play, we must also come to understand her theoretical influences. There were

presumably many theorists that informed Paley's approach in the classroom, but she was most heavily influenced, it seems, by the work of Vygotsky (1978).

Vygotsky (1967; 1978)

Vygotsky (1978) believed that young children played a head above, using play as a tool to aid them in their development. Vygotsky (1967) writes:

> in play a child is always above his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself. As in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form; in play it is as though the child were trying to jump above the level of his normal behavior. (p. 16)

Play was not something frivolously done for the enjoyment of the child; it was intentional, deeply satisfying, and even challenging at times. In fact, Vygotsky (1978) debunked a number of myths concerning play as he developed his framework. He argued that play was not simply for enjoyment (as many people believe) – as children find pleasure in a number of things (e.g., being held, soothed, sucking their thumb). This is not to say that pleasure is not a part of play, but rather it is not its primary function. He argued that children satisfy certain needs through play and that if we do not understand these needs, we really cannot appreciate the true value of play. Further, he argued for play as a tool for self-regulation; he believed that play reversed the immediate gratification that young children were so accustomed to. In fact, Vygotsky (1978) suggested that:

> to resolve this tension, the preschool child enters an imaginary, illusory world in which the unrealizable desires can be realized, and this world is what we call play. Imagination is a new psychological process for the child; it is not present in the consciousness of the

very young child, is totally absent in animals, and represents a specifically human form of conscious activity. (p. 93)

His extensive study of children has been foundational to educators today. Vygotsky's (1978) emphasis on socio-dramatic play has been formational in my own approach to the classroom. He placed a great deal of emphasis on this imaginary play, arguing that play which involves the imagination is rule-based play. In fact, he suggested "there is no such thing as play without rules" (p. 94). When children take on different roles (e.g., the role of a mother), their actions are determined by their understanding of a mother's role. There are rules of behavior apparent in the play – how they dress, how they speak, how they interact with the environment. In addition, Vygotsky (1978) related play to certain pivots in child development. For example, as the child learns how to think creatively with objects, the child begins to use them in unconventional ways. Vygotsky (1978) believed that "transfer of meanings [was] facilitated by the fact that the child accepts a word as the property of a thing; he sees not the word but the thing it designates" (p. 99). He goes on to suggest that in play children learn how unconsciously separate meaning from objects. This skill continues to grow into adulthood, where we learn to think more abstractly (e.g., even something as abstract as a match could be a horse). When play is valued for what it is, the important work of young children, we can use it as a constructivist approach to education, where children make meaning, establish rules, take on new roles, and discover their relationship with the world around them. Vygotsky (1978) believed that children were social constructivists, associating meaning through a context of culture. He believed that speech was the most important acquisition to the growing child because it allows the child to participate intelligently with their peers, while also facilitating the child's inner thoughts. He suggested that children learned through a zone of proximal development – the zone in which a

child could operate independently, but with the assistance of a more experienced peer. This critical zone was most often observed during a child's free play (Vygotsky, 1978).

Dewey (1990)

Dewey (1990), likewise, was a progressive educator of his time, pushing away from classical recitation, toward what we call today *experiential learning.* Dewey (1990) believed,

> …undoubtably the little child who thinks he would like to cook has little idea of what it means or costs, or what it requires. It is simply a desire to 'mess around,' perhaps to imitate the activities of older people. (p. 33)

However, in this messing around, as Dewey (1990) puts it so *eloquently*, the child is not simply self-seeking and self-gratifying. He or she is learning to negotiate the rules of the role they are playing; that is, "if the impulse is exercised, [and] utilized, it runs up against the actual world of hard conditions, to which it must accommodate itself; and there again come in the factors of discipline and knowledge" (Dewey, 1990, p. 33). Here, again, we see the idea of play as a tool for real-life practice (Paley, 1979-2014; Vygotsky, 1978). The child imitates in an effort to truly learn the skill, and within that pretend play, we see trial and error, self-regulation, persistence, and gained knowledge (Dewey, 1990).

Bakhtin (1981)

Bakhtin's (1981) idea of carnival play elicits similar themes. That is, as Sutton-Smith (2001) suggests "pretend play can be heavy and light, ritualistic and playful, earnest and frivolous' with an ever-changing heteroglossia of voices" (as cited in Cohen, 2011, p. 178). These changing and sometimes conflicting perspectives allow children to practice with the roles and rules of play. Cohen (2011) suggests, "similar to those in Bakhtin's (1981) carnival play, children…find themselves placed in an official hierarchy that subjects them to the demands,

desires, and language of parents, teachers, and society" (p. 179). Cohen (2011) goes on to explain how children use play to break through the, "unwanted structure and rules through pretending, which allows them to internalize the words and actions of parents and teachers through a persuasive discourse" (p. 179). We know that through play, children take on a variety of roles to understand the world around them. Again, we see play as this idea of *work*; there are rules situated within the roles children take on; there is certain structure that children must learn to negotiate within; there is purpose behind the play.

Piaget (1999)

Jean Piaget (1999) believed that children learned differently than adults, and that their cognitive development could be observed in four different stages: 1. Sensorimotor Stage (birth to two years – e.g., the child learns by doing), 2. Preoperational Stage (two to seven years – e.g., the child begins to use language and symbols), 3. Concrete Operational Stage (seven to eleven years – e.g., the child has a mature understanding of conservation, reversibility, cause and effect, etc.), and 4. Formal Operational Stage (twelve years to adulthood – e.g., thinking becomes abstract and logical reasoning occurs). He believed that children learned through mental building blocks, known as schemas, in which they organized and stored information (Piaget & Inhelder, 1972). This construction of knowledge and new meaning was an *interactive* process between children and their environments and could be observed as children played with challenging tasks. As children played, Piaget (1999) believed they were building schemas – through assimilation (the taking in of new information and the application to existing schemas), accommodation (the adaptation of schemas to current context), and equilibrium (the development that occurs as a result of these processes). What is important to note here, in Piaget's (1999) stages of cognitive development, is that children under the age of seven are not yet able to think concretely,

logically, or abstractly; instead, they learn from doing, trial and error, and talking themselves through those processes (as Vygotsky, 1978, also believed). Yet, in early childhood classrooms across the world, children are expected to behave and learn as adults; play, as a practice, is "frowned upon" (Overstreet, 2018, p. 220). Where is the disconnect between theory and practice?

While we have much to learn from the historical context of play (Bakhtin, 1981; Dewey, 1990; Paley, 1979-2014; Piaget & Inhelder, 1972; Vygotsky, 1978), there is also a substantial amount of current evidence in support of play (Grob, et al., 2017; Pyle, et al., 2018; Wohlwend 2008-2017). This research will be discussed below, in an attempt to further the conversation surrounding play.

Comprehensive Review of the Current Literature of Play

Recent work in the field of early education has bolstered the play-based movement, as evidence has been found in support of play for children's cognitive, creative, communicative, and socio-emotional development. Because development does not happen in isolation, it is difficult to categorize the effects of play on each domain; rather, we will discuss the impact of play on development from a holistic approach. We will begin with a brief discussion on the value of play before moving into perceptions' surrounding its role in development.

Cognitive and Creative Development. As children play, they become more creative and divergent thinkers; from role play to the use of open-ended materials, play requires children to be flexible in their thinking, and adaptive in their approaches. Bergen (2009) suggested play to be the medium for learning and creative development in the following ways:

1. Play serves as a channel of communication for children who are not always articulate in other ways.

2. Play enables them to examine materials and try techniques in artistic and creative endeavors.
3. Play helps them convey ideas and accomplish goals before their language skills are fully developed.
4. Play "substance" provides a filter that allows them to take risks without concern for world realities.
5. Play allows them to feel powerful in transmitting forceful ideas and producing exciting effects.
6. Play promotes an optimum learning environment within which they can function and flourish naturally. (p. 416)

Her work points to the use play to encourage flexible thinking and problem solving in the classroom, skillsets needed for the 21st century. Theodotou (2017), too, examined play in relation to creativity and critical thinking. He collected data from an intervention program known as Play and Learn Through the Arts (PLA) in Greece and found that while children were working together in an artistic way, they engaged in meaningful discussions with each other and utilized critical thinking skills. Additionally, Theodotou (2017) found that free play time enhanced children's print and written communication (e.g., children assessing poetry to find rhymes to accompany their illustrations). Wohlwend (2008) found that when children play, particularly in a literacy-rich environment, a reading/playing nexus occurs,

> where (a) reading supports play goals—reading to play—as children read books and charts to make play scenarios more credible or to gain the cooperation of other players and (b) playing supports reading development—playing to read—as pretending to be the

> teacher and teaching pretend students enables children to share and explore reading strategies. (p. 332)

This nexus, Wohlwend (2008) believes creates access into play for diverse learners, as well as those on the fringes of play. Further research conducted by Wohlwend (2009) examined the design conventions of children's toys and drawings, as well as their associated meanings in play and identities. She found that the preconceived notions and identities connected with the dolls influenced how the girls, specifically, upheld, challenged, or transformed the meanings they negotiated in princess play, including who could assume leadership roles. Additionally, she found that regular doll play during writer's workshop allowed children opportunities to improvise and revise character actions (Wohlwend, 2009). Her findings suggest that by allowing children the chance to play with popular cultural themes in an environment that challenges social norms, children can learn how to rewrite narratives in a more realistic way; that is, they can take on new perspectives, as Vygotsky's (1978) work also suggests. Overstreet (2018), too, examined the roles that children assumed during play and the development that occurred as a result. In play, Overstreet (2018) found, children widen their perspectives and understandings; they intermingle their innermost fantasies and the realities to which they are bound.

Communication and Socio-Emotional Development. Children immersed in play also build socio-emotional connections and strengthen communication skills. Cabrera et al. (2017) looked at play between parents and toddlers to examine the power of play on language and emotional development at prekindergarten. They found that mothers' playfulness was related to emotional regulation, while fathers' playfulness was associated with children's vocabulary skills. Additionally, the association between mothers' playfulness and children's development (both emotionally and linguistically) were strengthened when fathers engaged in more pretend play

and when children were happy and engaged throughout the play (Cabrera et al., 2017). It is important to note the happiness associated in play here. While happiness is not the goal of play, as Vygotsky (1978) points out, it is often a consequence of the satisfaction children derive from play. In a similar study, Coolahan et al. (2000) examined how interactive peer play related to the learning and problem behaviors of low-income minority children in a Head Start classroom. They found that positive peer play interactions were associated with active learning engagement, while disconnection in play was correlated to inattention, lack of motivation and passivity. That is, children who engaged positively in play were more engaged learners when compared to peers who were disconnected in play (Coolahan et al., 2000). As children play, especially socio-dramatically, they must adhere to the roles and rules in which their play is situated (Bodrova et al., 2013). This adherence builds children's self-regulation and, ultimately, their agency. According to Vygotsky (1967) "The role the child plays, and her relationship to the object if the object has changed its meaning, will always stem from the rules, i.e., the imaginary situation will always contain rules. In play the child is free. But this is an illusory freedom" (as cited in Bodrova et al., 2013, p. 113). Play is not as frivolous as it seems; it is actually one of the greatest displays of self-regulation that a child can exhibit. Further, as Eberle (2014) points out, play is socially rewarding; it strengthens our relationships, builds new friendships, and helps us find common ground with our peers.

Language and Literacy Development. Children engaged in play also build foundational language and literacy connections. Peterson and Greenberg (2017) examined the interactions between one teacher and her students in a dramatic play center, in an effort to show how such interactions develop children's language, literacy, and conceptual learning, as well as to extend children's learning. They found that by immersing herself in the children's play, the teacher

opened up opportunities to extend their vocabulary (e.g., leaving a positive impact on reading comprehension), introduced complex language (e.g., compound sentences, embedded clauses, and phrases), and supported children's concepts of print (e.g., drawing meaning between the letters and the sounds they make in letter writing; Peterson & Greenberg, 2017). Similar research by Axelrod (2017) examined the way that young children played with language – using nonconventional words and phrases, and even invented words, which helped to support not only their language development, but also an understanding of how language works (Axelrod, 2017).

Quinn and Kidd (2019), too, examined child-caregiver interactions throughout symbolic play and compared it to interaction in a non-symbolic, but similar context (e.g., functional play). They found that symbolic play typically displayed a greater frequency and duration of joint attention and gesture use, suggesting that symbolic play provides a rich environment for the exchange and negotiation of meaning. This led researchers to believe that symbolic play, rather than functional play, provided children with opportunities to engage in language and communicative development (Quinn and Kidd, 2019). This evidence compels us to believe that by encouraging parents and teachers to engage in play with their young children, we can simultaneously develop their social and cognitive development, while also furthering the argument on open-ended, inquiry-based play, as it provides a rich context for student learning and achievement. In addition, by gaging what the children are interested in, teachers can create a child-centered approach to education which builds upon students' funds of knowledge, and naturally engages children in deep thought, conversation, and problem-solving (Peterson & Greenberg, 2017; Quinn & Kidd, 2019).

Further research conducted by Cavanaugh et al., (2017) explored the impact of literacy-rich sociodramatic guided play on kindergarten student behavior and literacy development. They

found that students in the experimental, play-based condition scored significantly higher on the DIBELS assessment (medium effect size) and were also exposed to a variety of other literary elements, including story-composing, cause and effect, new vocabulary, and phonemic awareness skills. Additionally, students in the experimental, play-based group gained self-regulation, displayed better communication and negotiation with peers, and were more imaginative and creative in their play. They also found that students in this condition continued to play student-invented games during recess and free time, which extended their learning (Cavanaugh et al., 2017). When teachers provide an atmosphere which fosters play, students can achieve more, both academically, and socially.

Cremin et al., (2018) explored, specifically, the use of the storytelling and story-acting methods of Vivian Paley (1979-2014) in a group of preschool children (ages three to five), drawing from children's personal narratives in consideration of adult-child and peer interactions. This was done in an effort to observe children's co-construction of knowledge through a multimodal approach to literacy. What they found was that children were co-constructers of their own narratives by drawing on popular texts, society, pop culture, and home life. Additionally, they found that stories could be co-constructed both by peers and practitioners, supporting a multimodal approach to literacy (Cremin et al., 2018). While previous research has focused primarily on the individual student's progression through storytelling (i.e., language and literacy development), this piece of research focused more on the interactive benefits of storytelling in the classroom (i.e., co-construction of knowledge). Similarly, Nicolopoulou et al. (2010) explored the theories of Vygotsky (1978) and Vivian Paley (1979-2014) to deduce best practices in Early Childhood Education, including integrated play (rather than didactic methods) to promote child's social, cognitive, and holistic development. They found that children who

participated in the experimental (storytelling) groups displayed significantly higher narrative, emergent literacy, and social competence abilities than those in control ($p < .05$; Nicolopoulou et al., 2010). Mathis (2016), too, examined the intersection of imagination and play: the ability to take on different perspectives, and the understanding of self-identity. He found that informational books, as well as fantasy and realistic fiction, offer readers the chance to expand imaginative thinking, and that opportunities for children to play out story plots (e.g., retelling/acting out the story) give readers the chance to assume other perspectives (Mathis, 2016). As Vygotsky (1978) suggests, children take on new roles in play; these roles help them to think *a head above,* causing them to operate out of the zone of proximal development. These findings are evident of just that. As children play, they are simultaneously building schemas (Piaget & Inhelder, 1972) that help them not only in the short term, but in the long term, as well.

By examining the impacts of play on a child's cognitive, communicative, social, and creative development, it becomes clear that cultivating an environment steeped in a play-based pedagogy is crucial for child's holistic development. This contributes to the field of early childhood education significantly, by offering empirical evidence which supports play-based practices in the classroom. By encouraging positive peer play and allowing children the opportunities to develop these skills, we not only impact their social development, but also their academic success. Evidence such as this furthers the discussion on the holistic development of a child, as observed through play.

Comprehensive Review of Literature on Perceptions of Play

Unearthing the value of play is really only the first step in the process of furthering the play-based movement. We must look critically at the literature surrounding perceptions of play, and how those perceptions are influencing children's access to play in the classroom.

Methods for Literature Search

Over the course of several months, multiple searches were conducted in an effort to examine the literature surrounding teachers' perceptions of play. I used a variety of academic search engines, including Google Scholar, Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), and EBSCOhost Academic Search Complete. From here, only peer-reviewed articles published within the past ten years were initially considered. I searched for terms related to teachers' perceptions of play in early childhood education. Terms included: preservice + early childhood/preschool + teachers' perceptions/beliefs/values/attitudes/opinions + play. From here I found a fair amount of research. As I began digging into the literature more, I went to the references of the studies that I felt were most relevant to my study and found other literature to explore. I then searched for those specific articles and read/annotated them. The most relevant articles were chosen for the literature review.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria. The articles that were selected for the literature review included those that explored the play-learning connection/disconnect, addressed perceptions of play and how those perceptions influenced play access for children, examined the adult's perceived role in play, and the impact of professional development/practicum experience on perceptions of play. Studies that were excluded from this part of the literature were those that focused primarily on play (e.g., learning through play, development through play, importance of play, etc.). While there is a great deal of literature on the importance of play, the crux of this research lies in teachers' perceptions of play and how those perceptions change as a result of practicum experience in a play-based environment. Therefore, only the most relevant studies were included.

Literature Search. The search yielded a number of scholarly works. For this part of the literature review, seventeen articles were selected. Three studies focused on parents' perceptions of play and how those perceptions impacted play access; they were included because of their emphasis on the play/learning disconnect, a common perception held by many teachers (Dealey & Stone, 2018; Grob et al., 2017; Kane, 2016). Fourteen articles focused specifically on teachers' perceptions of play, how teacher preparation programs and practicums influenced those perceptions, and ultimately how those perceptions impacted the teachers' current or intended practices (Ebbeck et al., 2019; Giamminuti & See, 2017; Hegde et al., 2014; Hunkin, 2014; Jin and Moran, 2021; Jung & Jin, 2014/2015; Keung & Cheung, 2019; Leggett, 2017; Leggett and Newman, 2017; McFarland & Laird, 2018; Shank, 2016; Sherwood & Reifel, 2010; van der Aalsvoort et al., 2015).

Reviewed Studies. A brief synthesis of each of the studies will be discussed in the literature to come, including key findings and contributions to the research at hand. A summary of the reviewed studies can be observed in Table 2-1.

Table 2-1
Summary of Reviewed Studies

Studies	Participants	Setting	Research Method & Design
Parent Perceptions			
Dealey & Stone, 2018	99 families of kindergarten children	Mid-western suburban school district	Parents completed the Child Play Survey to assess children's out-of-school play; Correlational and regression analyses performed.
Grob et al., 2017	291 parents/ caregivers of children aged 3-5	NYC event aimed to promote parents' conception of play	Researchers posed a real-life, real-time intervention, conducted on-site surveys; further surveys conducted with two control groups after the intervention; multivariate analyses performed.
Kane, 2016	20 parents of young children who had participated in a children's summer camp	Cincinnati, Ohio	Parents completed questionnaires with both ratings and open-ended responses; descriptive statistics were employed on rated items and two rounds of line-by-line coding occurred on open-ended responses to draw themes.
Teacher Perceptions			
Ebbeck et al., 2019	432 early childhood teachers	Singapore	Mixed methods approach using questionnaires with both rating scales and open-ended responses; data were coded by emerging themes.
Giamminuti & See, 2017	3 early childhood teachers	A metropolitan primary school in Perth, Western Australia	This was a qualitative, ethnographic study and included tours of the school, photographs, and focus-group interviews with teachers; themes were drawn from coded data.
Hegde et al., 2014	6 nursery teachers; 4 kindergarten teachers	Public and private schools in Japan	In-depth interviews were conducted with participants to determine teachers' perceptions of developmentally appropriate practices. Six themes were drawn from the data.

Hunkin, 2014	4 preschool teachers; 3 preparatory teachers	Victoria, Australia	The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with the teachers; transcripts were member checked; themes were drawn.
Jin & Moran, 2021	3 Chinese teachers; 3 U.S. teachers	Both centers were university laboratory schools	The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with the participants; then teachers were asked to review a 3-minute clip of their teaching practices; Data were coded and recoded and finally categorized.
Keung & Cheung, 2019	286 participants completed questionnaires; then 29 educators were interviewed.	50 kindergartens in Hong Kong	This was a mixed-methods approach which included questionnaires and follow-up interviews; Data were coded into themes.
Leggett, 2017	6 early childhood teachers	New South Wales, Australia	The researcher took a sociocultural approach, using observations, recorded interactions, and artifact collection; further discussion took place during focus-group sessions. Data were interpreted for meaning.
Leggett & Newman, 2017	6 early childhood teachers; 59 children between the ages of 4-6	Three early childhood centers in New South Wales, Australia	The researchers conducted observations, digital recordings, and took photographs to look at interactions between the children and teachers; teachers participated in five focus-group discussions; 117 transcribed interactions were analyzed; key words and phrases were coded and categorized.
McFarland & Laird, 2018	26 early childhood educators	New South Wales, Australia (14 teachers); Texas (12 teachers)	The researchers conducted parent surveys and educator surveys, both which included fixed and open-ended questions; responses were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively; meaning was interpreted based on responses.
Shank, 2016	4 Primary schools	2 schools in the ‘slums’ of Nairobi; two schools in rural Kenya; All	The teachers were invited to come observe a Waldorf school to gain an understanding of their practices; follow-up discussions took place between the teachers and researcher; Saturday workshops were held to train

		schools were experimenting with the Waldorf method of learning.	teachers on Waldorf practices; Data were collected over the course of two years and included observations, documentation, and written reflections from the teachers themselves.
Sherwood & Reifel, 2010	7 preservice teachers	Private university in south central Texas	The researchers conducted interviews, observations of the teachers in practicum, and analyzed course-related documents; data were coded, interpreted for meaning, and categorized.
Van der Aalsvoort et al., 2015	31 Dutch 37 Welsh 40 German 19 Finnish preservice teachers	Utrecht University; Swansea University; Berlin University; Turku University	The preservice teachers were asked to watch a series of video clips of children engaged in play; They were then asked four open-ended questions to examine the play characteristics, as well as the teachers' role in play; Responses were transcribed and analyzed manually into categories relating to play and the teachers' role in play.
Role of Teacher Preparation			
Jung & Jin, 2014	207 college students/ Preservice teachers	Large, undisclosed university	The researchers designed a survey to assess teachers' perceptions of play in relation to the importance of play, the role of play in learning, and the role of play as curriculum. The survey was a six-point Likert scale and data were analyzed using ANOVA.
Jung & Jin, 2015	32 male students and 179 female students – preservice early childhood teachers	Large, undisclosed university	The researchers used the Future Professionals Survey (designed in previous study), and also incorporated one question on college coursework related to play; Bootstrapping was used to compare differences between those who had taken play coursework and those who had not.

Results of Literature Search and Limitations

Overall, the literature search provided a wealth of information on both parent and teacher perceptions regarding play. The literature examined perceptions of play and how such perceptions impacted play opportunities, both at home and at school. The literature was limited, as no particular studies examined the impact of practicum experience on perceptions of play. While the literature did examine teacher preparation, including coursework, trainings, and workshops, no studies considered the change in perception of play as a direct result of practicum experience in a play-based environment. While limited, the literature provided a baseline understanding of play perceptions in teachers and parents (who are the child's first teacher), alike. Specific results of these findings will be further discussed in the pages to come.

Parent Perceptions of Play. Kane (2016) examined the play-learning binary and discovered that while parents found value in play, they also saw it as "peripheral to, and less important than, the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills" (p. 290). That is, play and learning were thought to be separate, rather than intermingled, "mutually constitutive processes" (Kane, 2016, p. 290). Dealey and Stone (2018), too, considered parents' perceptions of play; specifically, they examined the perceptions surrounding play and educational readiness in an effort to combat the many U.S. governmental pressures (e.g., increasingly higher standards, performance scores, etc.) that are currently changing the framework of preschool and kindergarten classrooms. They considered parent perceptions of play, finding that all participants believed that play was important to development, ranging from 6-10 with a mean of 9.30 (*SD*: 1.11). Additionally, a negative correlation was found between the parent ratings on the importance of play and the amount of screen time allowed on school days ($r = -0.248$, $p < .02$), as well as non-school days ($r = -0.247$, $p < .02$). Additionally, all domain measures and scales

within the KIDS assessment were positively correlated (1. Approaches to Learning—Self Regulation, 2. Social and Emotional Development, and 3. Language and Literacy Development). Similar research conducted by Grob et al. (2017) examined parents' perceptions of play and the impact those perceptions had on a child's access to play. They evaluated an intervention which aimed to influence parents' values surrounding play and its relation to development; this was done in an effort to shape parental attitudes, which in turn, impacts play opportunities offered to children. They found that the intervention helped parents understand play in complex ways and gave them insight into how play could impact the child's future life. Additionally, 40% of respondents linked play with improved social skills and adult success (Grob et al., 2017). These findings reveal how parents' perceptions of play impact children's access to play, and therefore, impact the child's development. That is, parents who value play as foundational to a child's development, allow their children to play more. Can the same be suggested for teachers who value play?

Teacher Perceptions of Play. Shank (2016) focused on the integration of Waldorf-inspired pedagogies into mainstream early childhood classrooms, examining how imagination-based learning (e.g., storytelling, creative play, drawing, painting, play with words, etc.) supports literacy learning in young students. Shank (2016) found that the workshops helped broaden the teachers' understanding of what counts as learning and knowledge; Additionally, these experiences promoted positive changes in teacher-child relationships, as well as teachers' personal development (e.g., questioning of their own pedagogy and the exploration of new possibilities). This research is crucial, as it highlights changes that can be made in teacher perceptions as a result of long-term professional development. By broadening teachers'

understandings of play-based practices, we can create change. This study speaks to the power of professional development, the power of knowledge to transform.

Hunkin (2014) explored the discontinuity between preschool and primary school teachers, both in their philosophies and their approaches in the classroom, including values surrounding methods, assessment, and documentation. She found that teachers' perceptions about developmentally appropriate practices were historically rooted, incongruent, and later went on to suggest that both newfound knowledge and experience were necessary for improving continuity (Hunkin, 2014). Mawson (2006) and Margetts (2002), too, found that "teachers are trained to align with a particular philosophical tradition" (as cited in Hunkin, 2014, p. 33). This discontinuity of approaches has left teachers divided on the pedagogic continuum; some aligning with teacher-directed approaches, and others drawn to a more child-centered philosophy - all of which are influenced by the preservice training they attained (Hunkin, 2014).

Murray and Ramstetter (2013) examined the pull away from play in the classroom, as more and more recess time is cut from the curricular day to make time for *learning*.

> At the heart of this zero-sum game [according to Murray and Ramstetter, 2013] are assumptions that rigorous content requires work, while play is frivolous. Thus, play in schools is increasingly detached from academic content, serving as a nice-but-not necessary add-on that makes schoolwork more palatable or as a reward for good behavior or time on task meaningful to them: play. (as cited in Wohlwend & Peppler, 2015, p. 22).

To combat this perception of discontinuity between play and learning, Wohlwend and Peppler (2015) suggest Playshop models, which were developed to meet the standards through play, to inspire children to be creative and collaborative in their learning, and also to meet the academic rigor of the Common Core. These Playshops have been designed to help bridge the gap between

play and learning, and have been researched by Wohlwend (2015) in a number of Kindergarten classrooms, spanning back to 2005. Wohlwend and Peppler (2015) urgently ask educators to allow their children to play, "not as a nice enriching activity on the fringes of the school day but as a core basic for more engaged and rigorous learning that gives diverse children equitable opportunities to learn" (p. 26). Models, such as Playshops, serve to educate teachers on the importance of play, changing values and perceptions through education and experience, as Hunkin (2014) also suggests.

McFarland and Laird (2018) examined the perceptions of parents and teachers on outdoor risk play and how those beliefs influenced the play opportunities they provided for their children. Through surveys and interviews, they found that educators who valued such play did, in fact, provide the opportunity for children to take manageable risks, including a "free exploration of the environment" (McFarland & Laird, 2018, p. 159). Interestingly, McFarland and Laird (2018) also noted a significantly higher appreciation of risky, outdoor play in Australian teachers, when compared with their United States peers. Perhaps it is this perception of play as frivolous, and the values placed on academic standards that the United States has fostered, that has caused its teachers to lean away from such a play-pedagogy, as Murray and Ramstetter (2013) suggest. Risky play, as championed by McFarland and Laird (2018), is thought to build children's agency (in their unrestricted exploration of the natural environment), strengthen their gross and fine motor development, and also enhance cognition (as children learn to take and manage risks). However, as the evidence points out, perceptions surrounding such play are divided, and only those teachers and parents who value such play, offer opportunities in line with those values (McFarland & Laird, 2018). Teacher education, as Hunkin (2014) suggests, is essential in changing these understandings.

Jin and Moran (2021) examined teachers' perceptions regarding cooperative problem-solving in play and how those beliefs influenced their pedagogy in the classroom. While they found similar *beliefs,* with both U.S. and Chinese teachers, there was a difference, a *disconnect*, that is, between some beliefs and the teachers' practices (Jin & Moran, 2021). According to Ashley and Tomasello (1998) and Esan (2015), the complexity of cooperative problem-solving can be observed in play, requiring "two or more people to coordinate their solitary problem-solving techniques and investigate new ways to resolve a shared problem" (as cited in Jin & Moran, 2021, p. 503). Jin and Moran (2021) found that both Chinese and American teachers expressed values surrounding autonomy in play and children's abilities to problem solve and work collaboratively. However, they noted cultural differences in both the amount of freedom given, as well as the support offered by teachers; specifically, Chinese teachers placing an emphasis on child-to-child problem solving in play and American teachers placing an emphasis on teacher-directed problem-solving strategies (Jin & Moran, 2021). They found that when teachers "viewed children as capable, [they] attempted to distance themselves and provide additional 'space' for the engagement of children in [cooperative problem-solving]" (Jin & Moran, 2021, p. 508). Findings such as this indicate the importance of teachers' values and perceptions surrounding play and how those beliefs directly and indirectly influence their pedagogy in the classroom.

Leggett and Newman (2017), similarly, challenged teachers' perceptions of play as they related to both the indoor and outdoor learning environment, play without interference, and the adult's role in the support of play. They found that teachers were concerned about their role as an intentional teacher, especially in the outdoor learning environment, as they felt responsibility to take on the role of supervisor during this time. This shift in the teacher's role, they learned, left

educators feeling unable to interact meaningfully with the children, a finding at Little et al. (2011) also confirmed (Leggett & Newman, 2017). Further, Legget and Newman (2017) learned that "overall, educators' understandings of their role in outdoor spaces solely as a supervisor undermined the value play presents for children as, according to Vygotsky (1978), a leading source of development" (p. 29). In addition, they urged educators to reconceptualize their understanding of play as intentional and purposeful – a way for children to actively explore the natural world (Legget & Newman, 2017). Ebbeck et al. (2019), too, examined teachers' perceptions of play and teaching practices in the outdoor learning environment and found that materials and resources were often a challenge in providing children with a rich outdoor learning experience. In a further study, conducted by Leggett (2017), educators were challenged in their perceptions of their role in children's creative play. It was found that teachers understood creativity in play when they observed it, but had little understanding on their role in how to help facilitate creative thinking in play (Legget, 2017). Legget (2017) urged teachers to provide "stimulating learning environments" and to be "intentional with the types of strategies they use in order to facilitate creativity" (p. 851). Again, we see this thread of intentionality in teachers' perceptions of play.

van der Aalsvoort et al. (2015) conducted an international study on preservice teachers' perspectives of play, including the perceived characteristics of play, as well as the teachers' role in play. They found similarities in play characteristics across countries, noting the most common characteristic of play was *cooperation*: children working together toward a shared interest, accomplishing a common goal, etc. However, van der Aalsvoort et al. (2015) noticed differences in teachers' perceptions of their role in play, and found that these differences were a result of teacher training. Hegde et al. (2014), too, examined teachers' perceptions on developmentally

appropriate practices in the early childhood classroom, including perspectives on learning through play, child development, and the teacher's role as an observer/facilitator/model. They found that teachers' perspectives on play were aligned with a play-based pedagogy, believing play to be "all-encompassing and [enhancing] all domains of development – cognitive, social, emotional and physical" (Hegde, et al., 2014, p. 306). In addition, Hegde et al. (2014) found that teachers believed their role in the classroom to be more of a facilitator: to observe the children in play, to intervene as necessary, to offer support as needed, but not to domineer the activities or the interactions. These practices, they found, were congruent with the teachers' beliefs.

Keung and Cheung (2019) examined teachers' perceptions on the efficacy of play-based learning, and how those perceptions related to holistic child development. They found that teachers' play-based approaches were positively correlated with a collaborative school culture; That is, the administration and faculty were overwhelmingly in support of play-based practices and believed in the efficacy of learning through play (Keung & Cheung, 2019). In addition, Keung and Cheung (2019) found that play-based pedagogies were positively correlated with all the domains of holistic child development. In interviews with the teachers, themselves, the researchers found that teachers' roles shifted during play, vacillating between the role of facilitator and the role of playmate (Keung & Cheung, 2019). Kontos (1999), too, examined the two major roles that teachers assumed as children played. First, teachers "as play managers to set the stage, prepare materials or interesting corners to make an appealing play environment" and second, teachers as playmates "to follow the flow of play and maintain children's engagement by sharing attention and confirming children's behaviors" (as cited in Keung & Cheung, 2019, p. 628). Finally, teachers expressed the importance of professional development: "the necessity for clustering teachers in professional learning and refection on the concept of play-based learning

during and after implementation" (Keung & Cheung, 2019, p. 635). Giamminuti and See (2017), too, considered teachers' perceptions and how those perspectives influenced their approach in the classroom, only this time in relation to children's rights. Giamminuti and See (2017), argue that children's rights, thought to be at the forefront of education (Osler &Starkey, 2010), are often overlooked (Quennerstedt, 2011). They go on to suggest that early childhood teachers use their position and power to "challenge current discourses of children's rights through their pedagogical practice" (Robinson & Jones-Diaz, 2006, as cited in Giamminuti & See, 2017, p. 28). The question then becomes a matter of play as a child's right; that is, do children have the right to play? And if so, how are teachers' perceptions of play influencing those opportunities?

Sherwood and Reifel (2010) suggest that teachers' perceptions surrounding play are greatly unaddressed, despite the growing evidence of the value of play in early childhood education. They examined teachers' perceptions surrounding the meanings of play and discovered that no two teachers' definitions of play were alike. They learned that perceptions of play were shaped by experiences and other influences on the teachers' beliefs (Sherwood and Reifel, 2010). The *understanding* of play is critical to this research, as play can take on a number of meanings, depending on the perspectives and experiences of the educators under study. Further research by Sherwood and Reifel (2013) found a paradox in preservice teachers' beliefs surrounding the value of play and its *necessity* in the early childhood classroom; specifically, they found that teachers believed play to promote children's learning and development, but at the same time believed that the learning developed in play was not as crucial as the learning that takes place outside of play. Rather than seeing play as *essential* to learning, Sherwood and Reifel (2013) found that teachers perceived play as a break to learning, an outlet for energy, to refresh children so that they are better able to learn in a traditional, teacher-directed environment. That

is, the teachers viewed play as *valuable, but not essential* to learning. This paradox in teachers' perceptions is crucial in understanding the need for further professional development on the value of play for holistic child development.

These findings support the power of teachers' perceptions on play-pedagogy, their understanding of their roles in play, and the need for continued professional development (Hegde et al., 2014; Keung & Cheung, 2019). By educating teachers and families, alike, on the power of play, and providing them with rich experiences in play-based settings, we can change perceptions of play and increase opportunities for children to learn and develop holistically (Grob, et al., 2017; Keung & Cheung, 2019). By examining the existing research on the values of play and perceptions of play, and how those perceptions impact practices, we are better able to understand the significance of this research.

The reviewed studies suggest that play could be extremely effective in the holistic development of young children by providing them a natural context for learning, and that teachers can support such development by increasing children's time to play freely, providing a child-centered environment, and adapting the environment to be more inclusive (Banerjee et al., 2016). Further, teachers who immerse themselves in play, open up opportunities to extend children's vocabulary (e.g., leaving a positive impact on reading comprehension), introduce complex language (e.g., compound sentences, embedded clauses, and phrases), and support children's concepts of print (e.g., drawing meaning between the letters and the sounds they make in letter writing; Peterson & Greenberg, 2017). Even allowing children to play with language in non-conventional ways (e.g., inventing words, putting new, interesting sounds together, building on rules and patterns they are familiar with) can help them create a hybrid language which supports both language development and the understanding of how language works (Axelrod,

2017). Additionally, the storytelling methods of Vivian Paley (1979-2014) can be used to strengthen children's language and social development, helping children become co-constructors of knowledge (Cremin et al., 2018) resulting in significantly higher narrative, emergent literacy, and social competence abilities than those of their peers (Nicolopoulou et al., 2010). By gaging what the children are interested in, and meeting them where they are, teachers can create a child-centered approach to education which builds upon students' funds of knowledge, and naturally engages children in language and literacy development (Wohlwend & Peppler, 2015). Play is clearly valuable; but is the value of play enough to impact a teacher's pedagogy? And how do teachers' perceptions of play influence their intended practices (Jung & Jin, 2014; 2015)?

The Role of Educator Preparation Programs in Perceptions of Play. Research has found that teachers' perceptions of play greatly impact their approach in the classroom (Hegde et al., 2014), and that these perceptions, in turn, influence play access (Wohlwend, 2017). Teachers who understand the efficacy of play, who are under an administration overwhelmingly in support of play-based practices, are more likely to take a play-based approach in the classroom (Keung & Cheung, 2019). If perceptions matter, as the research points to, how do we educate our teachers? Research suggests that professional development, play-theory course work, and practicum experiences in play-based environments are not only impactful, but necessary (Jung & Jin 2014; 2015; Keung & Cheung, 2019; Shank, 2016).

Jung and Jin (2014) examined how teacher preparation coursework influenced perceptions of play in a group of early childhood education students. They discovered that play perceptions were highest in lower-level classman, but as students progressed through their coursework (particularly in junior and senior years), their perceptions on the efficacy of play were slightly lower, which is particularly problematic, as these students soon completed their

degrees and took on classrooms of their own (Jung & Jin, 2014). However, Jung and Jin (2014) also discovered that students who took play related coursework, continued to hold high perceptions of play (e.g., specifically, "the importance of play, the role of play in learning, and the role of play as curriculum") even in their senior year (p. 369). In addition, they found the reverse to also be true - that seniors, who did not take any coursework surrounding play, held lower perceptions of play, especially in the realm of play as curriculum (Jung & Jin, 2014). This evidence points to the necessity of play-based theory in preservice teacher preparation, the need for further professional development, and the impact of play-intervention on teachers' perceptions. This study is of particular significance, as the Future Professionals Survey (Jung & Jin, 2014) will serve as a primary instrument of data collection for this study.

Similar research conducted by Jung and Jin (2015) examined the relationship between early education teacher preparation coursework, teachers' perceptions of play, and teachers' intentions on play integration. They found that college coursework surrounding play-theory and play-based practices significantly influenced both the teachers' perceptions of play, as well as their intentions on using a play-pedagogy in the classroom. In addition, Jung and Jin (2015) found the reverse to be true - that preservice teachers who were not exposed play-based coursework showed a less-strong intention to incorporate play in their own classroom. However, it was noted that merely taking coursework was *not enough* to shift practices; perceptions of play must also be taken into consideration. Jung and Jin (2015) urge educators be mindful of preservice teachers' perceptions of play while teaching play-oriented coursework, as both formal education and perceptions impact the teachers' intentions. Finally, Jung and Jin (2015) recommend *practicum experience* (worth citing in full):

> …courses could provide opportunities to experience the benefits of play in childhood development and learning. Rather than just observing children at play, developing play-related activities based on their lessons from the course and implementing those activities in the field could better help future professionals acknowledge the benefits of play. Carefully designed observation and assessment strategies would also help future professionals recognize benefits of play and ultimately help build positive perceptions about play. (p. 305)

Practicum experience, such as this, is particularly significant, as this study will examine the impact of a play-based practicum on pre- and in-service teachers' perceptions of play, as well as how those perceptions influence their intended practices.

This research, while compelling, only begins to explore the value of play, the perceptions of teachers regarding play, and the interplay between the two. This study seeks to investigate those perceptions and values surrounding play and the influence those beliefs have on a teacher's [intended or current] pedagogy.

Significance of Research and the Current State of Play in Education

I believe this research to be critical right now, as access to high quality early childhood education is limited. According to the Children's Defense Fund (2020), in 30 U.S. states, the cost of quality center-based care currently exceeds the costs of public college tuition, averaging $24,000 per child each year. While federally funded programs, such as Head Start, are trying to move in a more play-based direction (Axelrod, 2017; Coolahan et al, 2000), budget cuts have left 92 percent of eligible infants and toddlers, as well as 50 percent of eligible preschool aged children underserved in 2018 (The Children's Defense Fund, 2020).

In addition, I believe play to be an issue of social justice (Boutte, 2008; Bryan & Jett, 2018; Dealey & Stone, 2018; Wohlwend, 2017), as only more advantaged children are privileged to play in school, and as more and more play time is cut from a typical school day. Research conducted by Almon (2007), Gray (2011), and Hofferth and Sanberg (2001) substantiate this claim – evidence shows a steady decline in children's unstructured free play time over the course of the last several decades, as increasing academic pressures are falling on public and private schools, alike (as cited in Kane, 2016). This idea of schoolification (Sugiyama et al., 2012), unfortunately, has trickled down into our preschool classrooms with detrimental impacts (as cited in Kane, 2016). According to Kane (2016):

> In the USA, schoolification of the early years occurs against the backdrop of neoliberal education policies such as the 2002 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation (Hursh, 2007). Emphasis on accountability and student achievement, as assessed through high-stakes testing, has created a climate of rising pressure on preschools to begin teaching children the academic skills that are assessed under the NCLB standards (Stipek, 2006). Preschools, a privatised commodity in the USA, must compete for students and 'schoolifying' may be a means to increase enrolment by speaking to parental anxieties fueled by neoliberal economic and educational policies. Critics argue that this process results in age inappropriate instruction and in early education that focuses on a narrow range of cognitive skills. (p. 290)

As a private school teacher, I experienced these pressures first-hand. The only programs in our community that are *experimenting* with play are few and far between, and also come with a hefty tuition, excluding children from underprivileged backgrounds. These disparities are often irreversible – leaving students of color, primarily, at a disadvantage (Bryan & Jett, 2018). This

preschool to prison pipeline is perpetuated by the underrepresentation of black and other minority voices in the classroom, but can be mitigated by the inclusion of "culturally relevant imaginative play" (Bryan & Jett, 2018, p. 107). However, such play is not allowed in the classroom; it is uncomfortable, misunderstood, and undervalued - and children, as a consequence, are suffering (Bryan & Jett, 2018).

Kinard and colleagues (2021) call on teachers to reconceptualize their ideas of play, recognizing that it can become a "critical theory-building curriculum if coupled with pro-Black curricula, and teacher self-work" (p. 329). Boutte (2008), too, calls teachers to action – to "move beyond rhetoric to substance" (p. 170) – to create classrooms that are: "grounded in the lives of our students,…critical,…multicultural,…antiracist, and pro-justice,…participatory and experimental,…hopeful, joyful, kind, and visionary,…activist,…academically rigorous,…[and] culturally sensitive" (Boutte, 2008, p. 170). There is social justice at work in play, and we must continue to advocate for it.

As long as play and learning are thought of in binary terms, and not as "mutually constitutive processes" (Kane, 2016, p. 290), play will continue to be cut to make time for learning. However, what is deeply misunderstood is the intermingling of play *as learning*, and until that shift in perception is changed, play time will continue to decline, and children will suffer the consequences (Dealey & Stone, 2018; Kane, 2016; Wohlwend, 2017). If teachers knew the power of play and could witness the observable difference it makes in a child's understanding of the world, they might become advocates for play in their own classroom (Wohlwend & Peppler, 2015). By changing the perceptions of teachers through experiences like this, we not only impact their philosophy, we change the school system – one classroom at a time.

This work is especially important to me, as this summer practicum has always been close to my heart as a play-researcher. Without the impact of this practicum on me many years ago, I would not be who I am today, personally or professionally. It completely changed how I taught in my preschool/kindergarten classrooms; it changed my professional trajectory – impacting both my research interests, as well as the content I teach at the at the university level; even *still,* it influences the way I interact with my own children today. If one summer practicum can make such a tremendous impact on me, I can only wonder how other educators might be influenced by such an experience.

Further in my career, I would like to start a similar program in our community, by partnering with a local university and school system. It is my intention, through conducing my dissertation research on this particular practicum, to be better equipped to do just that. By educating pre- and in-service teachers on the importance of play, and allowing them to have this experience first-hand, we further the discussion on play in education and our sphere of influence grows stronger. I believe in the power of play, and I am hopeful that others will come to understand its importance if they are able to experience that power directly. To conduct this research, I propose the following methodology:

Methodology

In an effort to better understand the relationship between pre- and in-service teachers' perceptions of play and practicum experience in a play-based environment, I elected to take a mixed methods approach. A mixed methods approach takes on both qualitative and quantitative qualities, and includes a variety of open-ended and closed-ended data collection methods. By using both forms of data collection, we get a more robust understanding of the phenomenon (Greene, 2007), while at the same time reducing limitations and biases inherent in either approach. By combining a statistical analysis of a survey instrument (see Appendix B) with qualitative interviews (see Appendix C), we gain a fuller understanding of the phenomenon of play, teachers' perceptions regarding play, and how their experience in a play-based environment impacts those perceptions. Further, we come to understand how those perceptions impact their personal pedagogy.

Context – Site Selection

This site was purposefully selected. Each year, a large university in the south-central region of the United States partners with a large, urban school district and develops a Play and Inquiry Summer Workshop for community children to attend. This program benefits the local children, while also providing practicum experience for the university students pursuing a degree in early childhood education. The program is diverse, includes children from all backgrounds, ethnicities, socio-economic statuses, and is also multilingual. The state that this program takes place in requires that summer school be offered for PreK and Kindergarten children who are considered to have "limited English proficiency" (LEP). The program is offered to the families of these children in the district, and typically anywhere from 100 to 150 families enroll. To foster a more diverse learning environment, the university also advertises the summer program to other

community children for a tuition rate of $90 for the month of June. A varying number of scholarships are offered through the university with funds left over from the program's budget.

The environment is rich and full of opportunities for children to engage in free play, in activities of their own choosing. This program is unique, as offers an alternative to summer school; rather than spending their entire day behind a desk, the children are included in the Play and Inquiry Workshop for half of their day (8:30a-11:30a) and then return to their teacher-directed classrooms when the workshop ends. The program includes a number of early childhood education students at the university and around 200 young children from the community between the ages of 3 and 8. In past programs, according to Kinard et al. (2021) student demographics were as follows:

> 66.5% [were] Latinx, 23% [were] white, 1.5% [were] Black, and 4% [were] Asian. Half of the students [were] members of families in which Spanish [was] the primary language; half [were] from families who [spoke] English primarily. This program [was] mandated for 3- to 6-year-olds identified as 'at risk' by the state, a label that communicates deficit in its failure to acknowledge cultural, linguistic, and heritage knowledge that children bring to school.
>
> (Swadener, 2000, as cited in Kinard et al., 2021, p. 324)

The summer program takes place throughout the month of June, Monday to Friday from 8am – 12pm. While not required, all early childhood education majors at the university are highly encouraged to attend this program as part of their practicum experience.

Participant Selection

The participants selected for this study were purposefully selected. Purposeful sampling, according to Creswell and Poth (2018) is used in research when participants "purposefully

inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon of the study" (p. 158). For the purposes of this study, early childhood education majors at the university, who had registered for the Play and Inquiry Workshop were invited, prior to the start of the practicum, to participate. Their participation in this study was voluntary; in return for their participation, their names were entered into a raffle for a chance to win one of two $50 gift cards to Target. Pseudonyms were assigned to the participants in an effort to protect their anonymity, and a master list was stored separately (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A total of 31 pre- and in-service teachers participated in the summer workshop. Of those participants, 29 consented to take part in the study. Two participants were removed by the researcher who joined the workshop a week late in an effort to keep consistency. As described in Table 3-1, the sample included 26 females (96.3%) and 1 male (3.7%), ranging between 18 and 34 years of age (81.5% [18-24] and 18.5% [25-34]). Of those, 40.7% identified as Hispanic/Latino, 55.6% identified as White/Caucasian, and 3.7% identified as Black/African American. Of the 27 participants, 18 were graduate students (66.7%) and nine were undergraduate students (33.3%). Years of experience in the classroom ranged from zero (11.1%) to five-to-nine years (3.7%), with majority of students falling in the one-year-or-less range (51.9 %), the rest having between two and four years of experience (33.3%). In addition, eight students identified as pre-service teachers (29.6%) and 19 students identified as in-service teachers (70.4%).

Table 3-1

Characteristics of Participants

	n	*%*
Sex		
Woman	26	96.3
Man	1	3.7
Non-binary	0	0
Not Listed	0	0
Prefer Not to Answer	0	0
Age		
Under 18	0	0
18-24	22	81.5
25-34	5	18.5
35-44	0	0
45-54	0	0
55-64	0	0
65+	0	0
Prefer Not to Answer	0	0
Ethnicity		
Hispanic/Latino	11	40.7
White/Caucasian	15	55.6
Black/African American	1	3.7
Asian or Asian American	0	0
American Indian of Alaska Native	0	0
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	0	0
Another Race	0	0
Prefer not to Answer	0	0
Student Status		
Undergraduate	9	33.3
Graduate	18	66.7
Years of Experience		
No Experience	3	11.1
1 Year of Experience or Less	14	51.9
2-4 Years of Experience	9	33.3
5-9 Years of Experience	1	3.7
10 or More Years of Experience	0	0
Classroom Status		
Pre-Service	8	29.6
In-Service	19	70.4

Data Collection Procedures

To collect this data, I conducted daily visits to the play and inquiry practicum. Prior to the start of the study, the Future Professionals Survey (Jung & Jin, 2014), discussed in detail below, was sent to the participants in an effort to establish a baseline understanding of their perceptions of play. Pre-Surveys were distributed electronically via Survey Monkey on May 27, 2022 and again on May 30, 2022. However, due to a low participant response rate, pre-surveys were distributed in person on paper on the first day of the intensive week of teacher preparation work (June 6, 2022), following the initial week of online readings. At the conclusion of the first week of teacher preparation (a one-week class intensive prior to workshop), post-1 surveys were administered in person on paper to all participants (June 10, 2022). Teachers who were absent that day completed the post-1 survey on the morning of June 13, 2022, before the children arrived at the workshop. I was on-site for the duration of the program (June 6, 2022 to July 1, 2022) from 8am until 12pm, Monday to Friday of each week. During this time, interactions between the teachers and children were recorded through informal, in-process interviews. This purpose of the informal interviews was to note if and how teachers' interactions with children were reflective of their survey responses, contrary to what they expressed, or any shifts that may have occurred. Formal interviews were also conducted throughout the practicum experience (during weeks two and four). Exactly two-thirds of the participants participated in formal interviews: 12 graduate students (66.67 %) of 18 total and 6 undergraduate students (66.67%) of 9 total, resulting in 18 interviews (66.67 %) of 27 participants total. Interview questions are discussed below. The purpose of the formal interviews was to see if and how perceptions of play were shifting for the teachers as a result of this practicum experience.

Finally, the Future Professional Survey (Jung & Jin, 2014) was redistributed to the teachers after the conclusion of the practicum experience (July 1, 2022). Surveys were administered in person to all present participants on the last day of the summer practicum. Electronic surveys were sent to missing participants via Survey Monkey. Responses to pre- and post- surveys were analyzed alongside interview data. Codes were developed and themes were drawn from the data. A more in depth look at data procedures will follow.

Survey Methods

To quantitatively assess teachers' perceptions of play, participants were invited to complete the Future Professionals Survey (permission granted by Jung & Jin, 2014). This survey included 11 questions centered on play and teachers' perceptions surrounding the importance of play, the role of play in learning, and the role of play as curriculum. Participants were asked to complete this survey both at the start of the study (pre-practicum), at the end of the initial intensive week of teacher preparation work, and again at the end of the study (post-practicum). Pre- and post-surveys were distributed both in person, and electronically via Survey Monkey by the researcher. This was done in an effort to determine any growth or changes in perspective that may have occurred as a result of this practicum experience. The details of this instrument are discussed below:

Instrument I

Prior to the work conducted by Jung and Jin (2014), there was no known survey instrument to address the perceptions of play of preservice early childhood teachers. After a thorough educational and conceptual literature review, Jung and Jin (2014) designed a survey which originally included 16-scale items (developed by Jung [2014] and reviewed by Jin [2014]). To ensure content validity, after the construction of the initial survey, the instrument

was reviewed by two content experts, and the survey was reduced to 14-scale items. According to Ayre and Scally (2014), Content Validity Ratio scores above zero, indicate that over half of the expert panel agree that the items are *essential* to the research. The survey items were then cross-checked with researcher ratings, and from there, 11-scale items were "retained to measure college students' perceptions of play in early childhood classrooms" (Jung & Jin, 2014, p. 365). These items are assessed using a 6-point Likert-scale: 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). The survey underwent field testing with nine college students, which led to small changes in wording and phrasing. After Institutional Review Board (IRB) permission was granted, the Future Professionals Survey (FPS) was used as the primary instrument of Jung and Jin's (2014) research on preservice teachers' perceptions of play. The survey can be viewed under Table 3-2.

Table 3-2

Future Professionals Survey Questions

1.	Play will continue to be important in educational settings.
2.	Play is important to the development of social skills in children.
3.	Play is important to the development of emotional skills in children.
4.	I do not believe the use of play in teaching would support students' learning.
5.	Integrating play in teaching will help my future students' learning.
6.	Play helps children to learn effectively.
7.	Use of play promotes learning.
8.	Play is important to the development of cognitive skills in children.
9.	Using play stimulates interest in subject matter.
10.	Play-based curriculum is confusing to me.
11.	Children learn better from classrooms with standards-based curriculum than play-based curriculum.

Note. Rated on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree).

The Future Professionals Survey includes 11-scale items and is subdivided into three domains. The first domain (*eigenvalue* = 5.131) measures the importance of play in the classroom, and includes:

> four items from the survey (i.e., play will continue to be important in educational settings, play is important to the development of social skills in children, play is important to the

development of emotional skills in children, I do not believe the use of play in teaching would support students' learning: reverse coded, α = .84; Jung & Jin, 2014, p. 365)

The second domain (*eigenvalue* = 1.348) measures the role of play in learning and includes:

five items (i.e., integrating play in teaching will help my future students' learning, play helps children to learn effectively, use of play promotes learning, play is important to the development of cognitive skills in children, and using play stimulates interest in subject matter, α = .80; Jung & Jin, 2014, p. 365)

The third domain (*eigenvalue* = 1.048) measures the role of play as curriculum and includes: "two items (i.e., play-based curriculum is confusing to me, children learn better from classrooms with standards-based curriculum than play-based curriculum: reverse coded, α = .54;" Jung & Jin, 2014, p. 365). A survey objectives map can be viewed under Table 3-3. In addition, the instrument has a composite Cronbach's Alpha score of .863 which is a good internal reliability score, falling approximately midway between .8 and .9 (with perfect reliability falling at 1). Given that Kline (1998) warns against using coefficients falling below 0.5, this reliability is above adequate (as cited in Jung & Jin, 2014).

Table 3-3
Survey Objectives Map

Variable	# of items	Measures	Data Level
Importance of Play	4	• play will continue to be important in educational settings • play is important to the development of social skills in children • play is important to the development of emotional skills in children • I do not believe the use of play in teaching would support students' learning	Interval

Role of Play in Learning	5	• integrating play in teaching will help my future students' learning • play helps children to learn effectively • use of play promotes learning • play is important to the development of cognitive skills in children • using play stimulates interest in subject matter	Interval
Role of Play as Curriculum	2	• play-based curriculum is confusing to me • children learn better from classrooms with standards-based curriculum than play-based curriculum	Interval

In addition to the above survey, participants were asked to self-report demographic information, including age, ethnicity, gender, student status (undergraduate or graduate), years of classroom experience, and whether they identified as pre- or in-service teachers.

Interview Methods

In addition to the Future Professionals Survey (Jung & Jin, 2014), interviews were also conducted with the participants while in the field. Interviews took place during the practicum experience and were both semi-structured and structured in approach. That is, some questions were planned (i.e., in an effort to gain clarity on the teachers' perceptions of play) and some questions were spontaneous (i.e., occurring during informal conversations and while teachers interacted with children). Formal interviews were video recorded, later transcribed, and coded for themes (Creswell & Poth 2018). Informal, in-process interviews were noted in a field journal and included in analytic memos. Throughout this process, member checking occurred to ensure data were being represented accurately. I asked additional questions, as needed, for further clarification, and asked participants if my understanding was reflective of their responses.

Formal interviews were conducted throughout the practicum experience (occurring during weeks two and four). This was done in an effort to determine any growth or changes in perspective that may have occurred as a result of this practicum experience. The structured interview protocol can be viewed under Table 3-4.

Table 3-4

Structured Interview Protocol

1.	What value does play have in education? How do you feel your values surrounding play shifting throughout this experience, if at all?
2.	How do you believe young children learn best?
3.	As a teacher, what do you feel is your primary role in the classroom?
4.	Do you feel that children learn best when they discover something on their own? Why or why not?
5.	How do you align your lesson plans? With curriculum? Standards? The children's interests? A combination of approaches?
6.	How do you see yourself teaching math in an early childhood classroom?
7.	How do you see yourself teaching science in an early childhood classroom?
8.	How do you see yourself teaching literacy in an early childhood classroom?
9.	How will you assess your children?
10.	How will you use play in your pedagogy, if at all?
11.	Is there anything else you would like to share about your teaching philosophy?

The interviews were conducted with the participants in order to gain a fuller understanding of their perceptions surrounding play, as well as to clarify any misunderstandings. The interview objectives map (see Table 3-5) helps identify the relationship between the research questions and the structured interview protocol.

Table 3-5

Interview Objectives Map

Variable	Items	Measures	Research Question
Play Value	1	Value of play in education	1
Philosophy of Children's Learning	2	Child Centered Approach vs. Teacher-Directed Approach	1
Lesson Planning	1	Curriculum, Standards, Interests	2
Teacher Pedagogy	4	Teacher as director, model, facilitator	2
Assessment	1	Standardized, Rubric-Based, Authentic Assessment	2
Philosophy of Teaching	1	Open-Ended Response	Both

By combining interview questions with survey responses, we gain a better understanding of the phenomenon (Greene, 2007).

Coupled with these quantitative and qualitative methods, the researcher committed to writing analytic memos throughout the study. This process helped to uncover key understandings and themes that may be emerging; memoing "becomes part of developing the theory as the researcher writes down ideas as data are collected and analyzed" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 84). The findings from these memos helped the researcher identify common perceptions surrounding play and bridge connections and/or disconnections between the participants' survey responses and interviews, as well as to the literature surrounding play pedagogy and teacher preparation. The analytic memos offered a day-to-day understanding of the practicum experience through the lens of the researcher.

Quantitative Data Analysis

The Future Professionals Survey (FPS) was used as the primary quantitative instrument of this study (Jung and Jin, 2014). Surveys were conducted prior to the start of the practicum experience (pre-test), again after the initial intensive week of teacher preparation work (post-1), as well as at the conclusion of the study (post-2). Results from the survey were transferred into SPSS (IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 27). Exploratory analyses were conducted to look for missing values, outliers, range, IQR, and standard deviation; box and whisker plots and histograms were developed to look at distribution.

To determine differences in pre- and post-survey data, a within-subjects design was chosen. To compare the means holistically between the pre- and post-survey data, data were first calculated into a composite score (i.e., sum) for each participant. In addition, a new column was developed which calculated the difference between the pre- and post-scores for each survey item.

A paired-samples t-test was employed to compare means between pre- and post-survey scores. The differences in scores help us to see how teachers' perceptions of play change over time, as a result of practicum experience in a play-based environment.

Ho: Pre-survey scores = post-survey scores.
Ha: Pre-survey scores ≠ post-survey scores.
(Ha = .05)

To look at the differences of perception of play as it relates to the domains of the survey, three separate analyses were run. The first group of questions were analyzed to look at participants' perceptions on the importance of play:

> play will continue to be important in educational settings, play is important to the development of social skills in children, play is important to the development of emotional skills in children, I do not believe the use of play in teaching would support students' learning: reverse coded. (Jung & Jin, 2014, p. 365)

The second group of questions were analyzed to look at participants' perceptions on the role of play in learning (i.e., "integrating play in teaching will help my future students' learning, play helps children to learn effectively, use of play promotes learning, play is important to the development of cognitive skills in children, and using play stimulates interest in subject matter;" Jung & Jin, 2014, p. 365).

And the third group of questions were analyzed to look at participants' perceptions on the role of play as curriculum (i.e., "play-based curriculum is confusing to me, children learn better from classrooms with standards-based curriculum than play-based curriculum: reverse coded;" Jung & Jin, 2014, p. 365). The three negatively worded survey items were reverse coded (as indicated above), so that on the scale, a response of 6 represented the highest positive perception of play, and a 1 represented the lowest negative perception of play. For each of these three domains, students were given a composite score. A paired-samples t-test was then employed to

compare means between pre- and post-survey scores in each of the three domains to see how changes in perception varied according to the domains of the survey.

> *Ho: Pre-survey scores (importance of play) = post-survey scores (importance of play).*
> *Ha: Pre-survey scores (importance of play) ≠ post-survey scores (importance of play).*
> *(Ha = .05)*

> *Ho: Pre-survey scores (role of play in learning) = post-survey scores (role of play in learning).*
> *Ha: Pre-survey scores (role of play in learning) ≠ post-survey scores (role of play in learning).*
> *(Ha = .05)*

> *Ho: Pre-survey scores (role of play as curriculum) = post-survey scores (role of play as curriculum).*
> *Ha: Pre-survey scores (role of play as curriculum) ≠ post-survey scores (role of play as curriculum).*
> *(Ha = .05)*

In addition, Post 1 and Post 2 scores were analyzed to see the differences between the teacher preparation portion of the summer inquiry program (June, week 1) and the play-based practicum experience portion of the summer inquiry program (June, weeks 2-4).

Qualitative Data Analysis

A values analysis was conducted to identify both *explicitly stated* and *implicit* values in the formal and informal interviews. (Daiute, 2014). Values analysis is a method which "…[considers] interaction and changes of meanings in terms of culture, power, and dynamic societies" (Daiute, 2014, p. 112). This method was chosen because of the nature of my research question; at the heart of teachers' perceptions regarding play are their inherent values surrounding play. By employing a values analysis, researchers gain from multiple perspectives, each contributing to the creation and debate of meaning behind the research topic. Through this, researchers can uncover values that are common, divergent, and even changing at times; it is an "activity-meaning system [designed to resemble] the implicit process of everyday social

influence flowing in different directions…" (Daiute, 2014, p. 112). Data were coded into themes using a systematic approach. First, values were identified through statements and phrases that were representative of that value; next, assumptions made about each value were considered. The data that were collected were meaningfully segmented (whether by statement or phrase) and then assigned a value. Finally, results of the values analysis were summarized, interpreted, and reported (Daiute, 2014).

Ethics in Research

It is my intention, with this study, to understand the perceptions of teachers – to gain a fuller perspective of their perceptions of play and a glimpse into their personal pedagogy. Though children are at the peripheral of this study, given their diminished autonomy, their protection in participation is at the forefront of this study. To conduct this research ethically, I adhered to strict guidelines positioned by The Belmont Report (1978): respect for persons, beneficence, and justice.

Respect for Persons

Throughout this study, respect for persons was maintained. The Belmont Report (1978) cites respect for persons as incorporating "…at least two ethical convictions: first, that individuals should be treated as autonomous agents, and second, that persons with diminished autonomy are entitled to protection" (p. 4). Risks of involvement in this study were limited and were disclosed to the participants by use of an informed consent form at the start of the study (see Appendix A). Participants were given the opportunity to choose to withdraw from the study at any time, to limit responses or avoid certain interview questions at their discretion. Children, though peripheral to the study, may have been observed through the teachers' interactions with them. No children were interviewed, identified, or intentionally researched. Any interactions that

may have occurred between the teacher and child during my time on-site were anonymously ascribed. That is, children were spoken of in a general sense, if at all – e.g., *Teacher A "I feel like [the child] is developing cognitively by playing with open-ended materials."* These measures were taken in hopes of protecting the children, as well as the adults involved in the study.

Beneficence

In addition, participant beneficence was ensured throughout this study. The Belmont Report (1978) assumes two general rules "…as complementary expressions of beneficent actions in this sense: (1) do not harm and (2) maximize possible benefits and minimize possible harms" (p. 5). At the start of the study, any risks of involvement were disclosed to the participants. In addition, any potential benefits were also disclosed. Participants, knowing to the full extent of the Researcher's knowledge of risks and/or benefits, had the choice to participate in the study, refuse participation, participate in full or in part, or withdraw from participation at any time. At the time of this study, there were no known physical or emotional risks of involvement beyond that of everyday life, other than the risk of potential confidentiality breach. In this event, measures were taken to ensure participant confidentiality; data were coded, pseudonyms were assigned, and access to the data files were limited to the researcher only. By agreeing to participate in the study, the participants' names were entered into a raffle to win one of two $50 gift cards to Target. Beyond direct benefits to the individuals, the value of this research was discussed with participants. The conclusions drawn from this study contribute greatly to the impact of play-based practicum experience on teacher preparation. By agreeing to participate, these pre- and in-service teachers help inform best practices in teacher education and preparation, which in turn, impacts the practices of teachers in the field, as well as the quality of education a child receives.

Justice

Finally, justice will be sought (and injustice, as a result, will be countered) throughout the duration (and any longstanding results) of this study. The Belmont Report (1978) cites injustice "…when some benefit to which a person is entitled is denied without good reason or when some burden is imposed unduly" (p. 5). It is assumed that the results of this study might be used to promote justice in early childhood classrooms. If, indeed, 1) play-based practicum experiences impact teachers' perceptions regarding play, and 2) those changes in perception impact a teacher's pedagogy – what measures could university teacher preparation programs take to better equip their teachers for the early childhood field? Could teachers become advocates for play in their own classroom, resulting in more play opportunities for their children? Perhaps. Could those same teachers inform colleagues of the benefits of play, affording more children the opportunity to play? Perhaps. Could schools take root of play-pedagogy and change the culture of best practices in early education? Certainly so. While these may not seem like social justice issues in today's society, they are in respect to the young child, whose world view is ever shaping. The results of this study bring to light issues of play in a new and somewhat controversial manner; is it *just play*, that is? Or is there something more to it? A growing trend to deprive children of play time, both at school and at home, is an issue of justice, if play (as we believe it to be) is something more than just play.

Power Sharing Approach

I position myself within this research, as both a researcher and observer, as well as a participant observer, recognizing fully the continual shift that may occur throughout the duration of this study. At times I will remain unseen, keenly observing and drawing themes, while other times I will speak directly to the participants in an effort to draw connections between the

teachers' perceptions of play and their personal pedagogy. I will move in and out of this continuum fluidly, using best judgement to determine when and how I should interact with the participants. My goal in this research is to portray the phenomenon worthily, forgoing my own agenda to gain the trust of my participants - to collect their stories, to humanize this research. I am a partner with my participants, and at times, an advocate, amplifying the voices of those who need a voice, seeking stories that have yet to be told. I recognize myself as a research instrument, admitting my own biases and special interests, my assumptions, my experiences, my expertise, and my relation to the participants.

Positionality and Ethics Statement – Researcher as Instrument

My interest in this research is grounded heavily in personal and professional experiences, as well as theoretical influences. I am an advocate for play-based learning and find myself on the frontlines of education fighting for what we believe young children need most – time for play. This idea of play has become somewhat controversial in today's educational climate. As a former early childhood and elementary teacher and director, I have stood my ground with administration on a number of occasions. As a credentialed early childhood educational trainer and early childhood faculty member, I research the impacts of play on development and equip my student-teachers with the resources they need to be successful in a play-based classroom. With the ever-growing pressure on teachers and young children, alike, to conform to educational standards, time for play is getting pushed further and further to the wayside. Children need time, true free time, to discover the world around them.

I stand on the shoulders of many educational theorists – Lev Vygotsky (1978), who believed children played *a head above* where they were developmentally; Jean Piaget (1999), who believed children, when engaged in their surroundings, actively constructed their own

knowledge; Howard Gardner (1983), who believes that intelligence is multifaceted and displayed in a variety of ways; Erik Erikson (1993), who believed that children learned through their interactions with others; Maria Montessori (1995), who believed that children had absorbent minds and learned best through real-life experiences; Loris Malaguzzi (1997), who believed that children expressed their knowledge through 100 different languages; John Dewey (1990), who focused on the process of learning, rather than the product, and believed that children learned best through play and lived experiences; Paulo Freire (1970), who believed in lifting up the stories of the oppressed; and Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) who believed that the child's social environment greatly impacted their development both directly and indirectly through various ecological systems.

I am most significantly influenced and inspired by the work of Vivian Paley (1979-2014), who, like so many educational theorists before her, believed that play was the work of young children; she also believed that storytelling was *play in written form*. Over the years I have become intrigued by the children Paley (1979-2014) observed in her books. I am profoundly interested in coming to understand *why* children play the way that they play and what that means for the future. For years I have been fascinated by what the children in my classroom were playing, and the impacts their environment had on the content of their play. As a parent, myself, I am continually intrigued by the play of my own children - how the experiences I provide for them stimulate their play and how my level of involvement enhances or hinders their play. If play is practice for real life, as Vygotsky (1978) believes, what kind of life are our children practicing for? And what does this mean for the children who are not allowed to play? Are they at a disadvantage? And, if so, what can be done to mitigate this?

I come to this argument with bias, believing play to be the premier window into the soul of our children. While some consider play to be just that, *play*, I have reason to believe there is something more at work beneath the surface. These biases, no doubt, lead me to look further into this phenomenon, to investigate play in all of its simplicities, as well as in all of its complexities. Play, as described in detail by the many educational theorists I have mentioned previously, is more than a fleeting pastime. It is the work of young children; it is how they construct meaning and connect with the world around them. Dramatic play (everyday make believe), especially, can give us insight into how children relate to their environment. Whether they are playing house, or superheroes, or school, or funeral home, they are learning ways to grapple with reality, the unfamiliar, fear, failure, success, and fantasy. I also believe teachers to be the gatekeeps of play; that is, teachers who value play will continue to advocate for it. Likewise, I believe teachers who do not hold such a value will prioritize direct-teaching over play. Along with this, I believe practicum experience in a play-based environment to be invaluable to a teachers' perceptions of play. It was this very practicum experience that led me to such strong convictions surrounding play when I was a graduate student myself. And while not a direct participant, my lens cannot help but be shaped by my own experiences as I walk through the hallways of this workshop again. Jackson and Mazzei (2012) remind us that "it is also very much about our own material ⟷ discursive reconfiguring that is occurring as we re-insert ourselves into the event. In other words," they explain, "how we are becoming as researchers as we read and engage…" (p. 132). These experiences, after all, are the driving force behind this research, and I confront that bias directly. There may, in fact, be times when I am tempted to make connections that are not there, to draw conclusions that are unwarranted. For this reason, I have elected a mixed methods approach, drawing first from a quantitative stance, then following back with qualitative data

collection methods. This triangulation of methods helps mitigate my biases. In addition, I will record all structured interview data, document and transcribe findings in field notes, and member check with the participants, in an effort to gain a fuller perspective of these teachers' perceptions of play and how those values impact their personal pedagogy.

After considering the existing research in the literature, as well as admitting my own biases and experiences, I feel there is a need to look at how a practicum experience in a play-based environment impacts teachers' perceptions of play, and how those perceptions influence their intended approach in the classroom. And if play perceptions can be shifted by such an experience, how can other teacher preparation programs provide opportunities like this for their pre- and in-service teachers?

While the phenomenon of play is vast and could not possibly be uncovered in a single study, I would like to explore it further. This is my calling as a researcher – to humanize this research. These are not merely numbers, or cases, or codes of data; these are teachers, and these are their stories. Let us use this knowledge to understand the teachers better, and if possible, to provide better outcomes for their children. I come to the table with an open ear, an open mind, an open heart, and a pencil.

Results and Findings

When I embarked on this journey, I set out to discover how teacher perceptions regarding play were shifting as a result of this practicum experience. What I found was so much more than that. I came to know a group of teachers, who welcomed me into their lives, and trusted me with their stories. I watched them closely as they grew to love the little ones around them, as they struggled and strived together to become the best teachers that they could be. I watched them stretch and change, question, and think critically, while also becoming energized and excited about the future; I watched them fall fatigued, and even confused at times; I watched them inspire one another. I grew with them, as I got to know them, questioning my own beliefs as an educator and a researcher. It was a summer of growth and change for us all – for better and for worse, at times. Due to the nature of this research, in considering change in perception over time, I offer a chronological perspective on the events that unfolded this summer. Tamsin Lorraine writes:

> As each moment slides from the present into the past, we can reassure ourselves that we are adding recognisable blocks to a building of our future we collectively share. A time out of joint suggests that there is no way to calibrate the pasts of our lived experience into a unified chronology. Chronological time is constructed out of the habitual reactions of bodies, the memories and expectations of conscious reflection, and collective forms of interpreting the past insisting in our present. We erase incongruities and smooth our paradox in order to create the delusion of time as a seamless whole. (as cited in Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. xi-xii)

By understanding, first, the context of this study, we are better informed to interpret the data. While limited, and greatly impacted by my own valuation of play-theory and practices, I

offer my lens into this phenomenon of play and the complexities as unique as the individuals I came to know. In an attempt to convey my understanding as Vivian Paley (1979-2014) did so eloquently throughout her years of classroom research, I offer a *Paleyian* perspective on the stories that unfolded this summer – the day-to-day interactions, the challenges, the discoveries, and still, the lingering questions.

The Practicum Experience – A Paleyian Perspective

The Intensive

June 6, 2022

It began with a number of discussions surrounding best practices in early childhood education; these discussions were led by three professors - P. Egret, T. Callahan, and E. Smith. In total, there were 31 teachers, a mix of undergraduate and graduate students, all coming from varying experiences and backgrounds. At this point in the summer workshop, all of the teachers had been required to complete an intensive week of readings and respond in written reflections. This work was completed asynchronously, online, and Monday, June 6th, 2022 was the first day of in-person professional development. This week would serve as an intensive week of teacher preparation. There were a few games and get-to-know-you activities, and teachers were teamed up into small groups, which they would work with for the rest of the summer. These groups were comprised of three or four teachers, and the teachers would rotate together as they served in various roles and capacities at the summer workshop. The initial week of professional development was intended to help teachers form relationships, make connections between readings and theory, and develop their teaching philosophy further. These early days of professional development also helped to prepare the teachers to work with the community children, who would not arrive at the school until the following week.

One of the most striking activities on the first day of professional development centered on the teachers' philosophies of early childhood education. This activity served almost as a baseline of beliefs; it helped the teachers to make connections to the readings, as well as to their personal experiences in the classroom. During this activity, teachers were asked to work with their teammates (those who they would work with throughout the duration of the workshop) to determine what two or three words would best represent their philosophical beliefs and pedagogical approaches. Each team was given three blocks, which were made of up-cycled materials (another emphasis of the workshop). The milk-carton boxes were covered in contact paper and paired with post-it notes, on which teachers were asked to write their foundational words (see Figure 4-1). The teachers were then directed to stack their blocks in order of significance; that is, blocks that the teachers believed to be *more* foundational were placed closer to the bottom and used as "supports" for the other philosophical aspects. The professor explained that there were no wrong answers, and that even if they ended up with one long layer of blocks, all believed to have the same significance, that would be okay. This was an exercise to help the teachers understand their own beliefs, and even challenge their own perceptions.

As the groups came up one-by-one, their blocks were added to the table. They explained their thinking and thought process, and rearranged other blocks, as they believed to be necessary. There were many commonalities in the teachers' beliefs, most of which were supported by the course readings from the previous week. Words and/or phrases that were exactly the same were stacked in front or beside each other, to emphasize their importance (rather than discarding the repeated words). Some common words that were given included, in no particular order: making connections, equity, child as researcher, free choice, embracing perspectives, respecting

boundaries, fluid, collaboration, freedom, creativity, self-discovery, non-restrictive, trust, exploration, curiosity, theory-building, and open-ended.

Figure 4-1. *Blocks of Early Childhood Education Foundation*

As the teachers reflected on this process, some interesting discoveries were made. It was noted that, because the professor held the block horizontally in his demonstration, the teachers defaulted to follow that same path. The professor pointed out that there were social norms and rules that were at work, even when the teachers did not realize it. He went on to explain that there were other underlying social "contracts" agreed upon as they completed the activity; for example, *clapping* as each group placed their blocks on the table. He suggested that we all bring a set of assumptions and "rules to play by" when we enter into the social world (P. Egret, personal communication, June 6, 2022). He used the block pyramid as a metaphor for the way we approach early childhood education. Learning never happens in isolation; rather, children come to us with a variety of experiences that shape the way they interact in the classroom. The teachers continued to reflect on the process, offering their perspectives. There were themes of philosophy-building as a cooperative exercise; that is, as the teachers worked together, the tighter their philosophy became. As they considered the significance of each word, they shared common knowledge, and brought personal perspectives that helped to inform their choice making and problem-solving. Again, another metaphor for cooperative play in early childhood education; as

children play together, they learn from each other. Theories are built, connections are made, and assumptions are questioned.

The teachers were also asked to draw connections between the readings and their choice of words. There were themes surrounding environment, and how a teacher's role of facilitator helped children to find and express themselves creatively – according to Lilly, an in-service teacher, "The readings spoke about giving children an environment that helps them find themselves and also fosters creativity." There were also themes of equity in the classroom and the importance of meeting the children's individual needs. According to participant Arlo (in-service teacher), "equity is a huge component. If we don't know where they come from, we have to meet them where they are. We can't make assumptions." The professor challenged them to think even more critically, asking the teachers if any of them had siblings (most teachers confirmed that they did). He went on to ask if they were anything like their siblings, to which most of the teachers laughed in disagreement. His example highlighted that even children who come from the same home life, raised by the same parents, speaking the same language, and offered [nearly] the same experiences, would come to the classroom with different perspectives (P. Egret, personal communication, June 6, 2022). Again, reiterating that we can never make assumptions.

There were other themes of equity raised by teachers concerning play. Some teachers believed play to be instinctual; that is, children were naturally inclined toward play. Elena, an in-service teacher, agreed, suggesting, "if students have a choice, they're going to want to play." The rest of the cohort nodded in agreement, as the professor suggested that you can either meet the children through play, or spend your entire day fighting against it (P. Egret, personal communication, June 6, 2022). The professor went on to explain deeper implications of play, or

the lack thereof, citing Dr. Stuart Brown (2009), the founder of The National Institutes of Play. Brown collected the stories of murderers and other criminals, finding that most had an underlying theme of play time that was cut off too soon. In his work, Dr. Brown, discovered that play was essential to development, even examining the interactions of polar bears, coming out of hibernation, encountering other mammals (i.e., potential prey), and rather than attacking, wanting to engage in play with them. What was most interesting, was that the smaller mammals would want to engage in play with the polar bears, even putting themselves in harm's way. Play, it would seem, was *instinctively*, valuable.

The teachers ended the first day of professional development by playing freely with a different open-ended material – aluminum foil. Among the finished products, I observed, an airplane, a bird, a mermaid, a tiara, a flower, a pair of glasses, a Viking costume, and a rock band, complete with matching shoes and headsets. Each creation was unique in design. Some creations were intentionally made, (e.g., "I had to get creative with how to make my original idea work" – Josie, pre-service teacher) while others were adapted over time (e.g., "I went in with the intention of building one thing, but once I got into it, I realized I wanted to rework it into something else" – Ashley, in-service teacher). Some teachers kept the aluminum smooth, while others crinkled it up to make it easier to work with. Still, other teachers brought in other materials to support their creations. One in-service teacher unrolled her foil entirely, so that she could use the cardboard roll underneath as a support object (Elena). All of these variations, the professor pointed out, were examples of flexible thinking, engaging prior knowledge, and creative problem-solving. The professor then asked the teachers to describe the properties of aluminum foil. One pre-service teacher described it as "shiny" (Kara). P. Egret followed up with "what makes something shiny?" (personal communication, June 6, 2022). After a pause, another

participant chimed in “it reflects the light” (Reyna, in-service teacher). Other terms used to describe the foil were malleable, flexible, rigid, and smooth. A discussion took place on the importance of being able to describe the properties of an object to know *what it is*, and to also know *what it is not*. Knowing the opposite of an object, that is, is just as valuable. The professor used this activity to point out to the teachers that there were a number of ways to engage children in conversation and creative thinking as they played with open-ended materials in unconventional ways. Another professor encouraged the teachers to bring in open-ended materials of their own to share with the children, and that by doing so, they would “amplify the children’s possibilities” (T. Callahan, personal communication, June 6, 2022).

June 7, 2022

The second day of the summer workshop began with some preparation work. Teachers were asked to self-select a committee that they would serve on throughout the summer. There were five committees: 1) Sustainability, which focused on collecting and organizing open-ended materials. Though all teachers were required to bring in open-ended materials from home for the children to work with, the teachers who served on the sustainability committee took on the extra responsibility of reaching out to local businesses for donated materials for the children to work with (e.g., scrap wood, fabric scraps, recyclables, etc.). 2) Homeroom Liaisons, who were responsible for the setup of homerooms and keeping track of rosters. 3) Newsletter, which was a committee dedicated to documenting the workshop through photos, artifacts, stories from the children, etc. These newsletters would be shared with the parents of the children in the workshop. 4) Nutrition, which was a committee designed to take care of the meal preparation for the summer. This group of teachers was given a budget to shop for food and/or supplies, and were tasked to plan snacks that were nutritious and involved the children as much as possible. 5)

Greeting/Dismissal/Parent Liaisons, who were responsible for drop off and pick up procedures and served as a point of contact for parents of the children in the workshop.

After teachers elected the committee they wanted to serve on, they were given a rotation schedule with the areas that they would be assigned to. There were eight designated areas that the teachers were assigned. Though the flow of the workshop, driven by free choice, allowed children to move freely from space to space, the teachers were assigned to certain areas throughout the day to ensure that they each obtained a number of hours in each placement. Areas of the workshop included: 1) Storytelling/Story Acting Book Making/Book Acting, 2) Inquiry-Based Science, 3) Art, 4) Outdoor Play, 5) Boxville (i.e., a space with boxes and other open-ended materials), 6) Cooking, 7) Constructive Play, and 8) Woodworking.

After teachers were given a brief introduction to each of the areas, they were tasked to begin with room set up. There were a number of supplies that the school already had in house, such as wooden block sets, painting easels, tables, etc. There were also a number of supplies that were either donated from local businesses or purchased with budget money, including several large pieces of wood and a variety of building supplies. The program relies heavily on the use of recycled and other open-ended materials. This approach not only saves money, but also pushes children to become creative thinkers and flexible as they play. By doing so, the play options truly become limitless. When asked to reflect on the process of the initial room set up and the organization of supplies, one in-service teacher, Elena, mentioned that "everything [was] like a blank canvas. [The materials] were not something that we [could] predict how they [would] be used. We don't know what it's going to be." The professor agreed, that "we always jump to conclusions on how things will be used" (P. Egret, personal communication, June 7, 2022). For example, when we look at a blank canvas, we typically envision it to be a surface for paints. We

put limits on the use of an object based on our preconceived notions of what we think its potential could be. A child, on the other hand, may see the same canvas and use it to build a fort.

While reflecting on the process, another teacher mentioned that she was curious to see how the materials would be used. She spoke specifically of the 2x4s that she was carrying through the hallway with a peer. As she considered the weight and length of the boards, she wondered to herself how the children would learn to work with such a cumbersome object – "thinking about three-to-eight year olds, and those pieces of wood that are huge… I'm thinking, how can we support them as they take that on?" (Sloane, in-service teacher). This opened up room for discussion on when to step in and help, and when to step back and watch the learning unfold, as there is value in the *struggle* of play. Other teachers spoke of the open-ended materials they encountered while setting up, and trying to discern what to keep and what to discard. One professor found pieces of foam, initially thinking they would have no use. However, a teacher stepped in and saw potential in the material. She said to the professor, "no! Those look like windows! We can use those in Boxville," (Samantha, in-service teacher), and so she saved the materials from being discarded. There seemed to be valuable learning occurring even in the simple task of setting up the learning spaces.

After some initial set up time, the teachers were tasked with brainstorming lists of items that they would like to bring into each of the areas they would be working in throughout the following week (see Figure 4-2). It seemed evident, that as teachers worked together to create their list of materials, they recalled information from their readings and conversations. Their materials were open-ended, and encouraged children to think and play in creative ways. One pre-service teacher mentioned that she "just want[ed] it to be unstructured and to see what [the children] c[a]me up with" (Tori). Another participant mentioned that his group was trying to

think out of the box; specifically, they were “trying to think of other ways to create art without using ink” (Arlo, in-service teacher). He went on to mention ideas of painting with nature items, using rocks on cardboard (as compression art), making nature collages, and more.

Figure 4-2. *Brainstorming Activity*

The professor went on to introduce the concept of verbal mapping with the teachers. To do this, he used the illustration of sports commentators – “there’s always two people: the analyst and the play-by-play. The analyst gives judgment. The play-by-play simply announces what is happening” (P. Egret, personal communication, June 7, 2022). Verbal mapping, he went on to explain, is the play-by-play. Instead of giving judgement statements (e.g., good job), we simply repeat back what we see the child doing (e.g., you stuck those two things together, and they stayed). Verbal mapping is an important aspect of the summer workshop, as it takes some time to master. It keeps our teacher judgment out of it, and opens us up for conversation with the children.

To conclude the professional development for the day, the teachers were asked to play freely with open-ended materials. The professors brought in large bags full of recyclables, emptied the bags on the floor, and gave the teachers blue tape to fasten their creations together.

As the teachers worked, they gained first-hand experience of how children learned as they played with the materials themselves. They learned to collaborate, problem-solve, and think creatively. Most importantly, they thoroughly enjoyed the process. It was a glimpse into the intermingling of play as learning, and the teachers' creations were a testament to that. Buildings, figures of people, set design, and even simple machines were observed in this process (see Figures 4-3 and 4-4). Again, we see this theme of limitless possibilities.

Figure 4-3. *Open-Ended Creations, Part 1*

Figure 4-4. *Open-Ended Creations, Part 2*

June 8, 2022

The third day of teacher preparation focused on the process of storytelling and story acting, as championed by Vivian Paley (1979-2014). A guest lecturer came to the cohort and demonstrated how the stories would be collected verbatim from the children, scribed by the teacher, and then acted out on the designated stage. He began by asking the teachers if they were familiar with the process or if they had any reservation about it. One in-service teacher, timidly, raised her hand, and shared her hesitancy about collecting the stories verbatim, not correcting the child's *misuse* of language, and missing out on teachable moments. Participant, Anne, wondered "if we continue to allow the child to speak incorrectly, won't that follow them for the rest of their lives?" The guest speaker opened it up for the cohort to discuss. One participant believed that language was a developmental process and that we should value the child at their current stage of development – "I think where they are developmentally… that skill will just develop over time. There is still value in this stage of the process" (Arlo, in-service teacher). Another in-service teacher asked a follow up question, "what if the child self-corrects or another student corrects them?" (Julie). The teachers paused for a moment, and the guest lecturer offered some insight. He spoke of ideas of linguistic justice, and how children, especially those who are second language learners, sometimes feel inferior to other children – often coming to school feeling like "their home language is wrong and needs to be corrected" (C. Martinez, personal communication, June 8, 2022). By correcting children's language, he went on to explain, we "subtract from their identity;" Instead, he suggested that we empower children with their home language, encourage them to not put a "hierarchy of value on the different languages" (C. Martinez, personal communication, June 8, 2022), and allow them to code switch. In storytelling, the lecturer went on to explain, "there is a sense of ownership. Even if [the children] aren't able

to write their own words, these are their stories" (C. Martinez, personal communication, June 8, 2022).

The conversation shifted into the many benefits of storytelling with children and how it helps children to develop holistically. Storytelling, as it was explained, helps to meet the children where they are; it is a natural bridge from culture to language, from play to academics. The teachers offered their own take on storytelling as a tool in the classroom. One in-service teacher explained that it helped the children with language and literacy, as "they are learning concepts of print, and reading left-to-right" (Reyna). Another in-service teacher brought up the socio-emotional development that occurred as children participated in the process, as "…they are learning academic concepts, but so much more than that. They're learning how to cooperate, regulate, even find joy in the process" (Elena). As the conversation unfolded, the lecturer continued to push the teachers to think about the standards met as children engaged in storytelling – "rather than teaching in a skills-isolated way, storytelling helps to meet all the [standards] simultaneously. Storytelling empowers children. It validates them" (C. Martinez, personal communication, June 8, 2022). Another professor continued with that thought, suggesting "the [standards] are on our shoulders to teach, but it is up to us how we are going to meet those [standards]. We have freedom in the interpretation of the [standards]" (P. Egret, personal communication, June 8, 2022). Finally, in an effort to circle back to the original question, the same professor suggested that "through the process [of storytelling], language changes, language evolves, it 'corrects' (notice my quotation marks), if you want to say that" (P. Egret, personal communication, June 8, 2022). The teachers were then given a number of child-written stories to read and act out in small groups. As they took turns reading and acting out the

stories, they also took turns practicing their role as teacher in the storytelling process (see Figure 4-5).

Figure 4-5. *Storytelling Practice*

Storytelling is heavily emphasized in the summer workshop, as it is a process thought to bring children together, despite their cultural or linguistic differences. Because the program is multi-lingual, the university's faulty emphasize the importance of a linguistically-just environment. Though, as one professor explained, the state sees the label of LEP (Limited English Proficiency) as a *deficiency*, the university sees multilingualism as an *asset.* He warned the teachers to not let languages divide them, suggesting that "languages don't dominate. Languages are *used* to dominate" (P. Egret, personal communication, June, 8, 2022). Because of this, the university urges their teachers to embrace those differences early on. The faculty refer to this as *Latinx Brilliance* – the celebration of language and culture that make our classroom environment so enriching. The professor went on to explain that the workshop would already have a sense of separateness, as some children would arrive via bus to a state-mandated summer school program (i.e., those labeled as LEP), while other community and university children

would attend the workshop by choice. He urged teachers to be intentional with how they welcomed children, especially those who did not speak the same language, to combat that natural separation that occurs, advocating, "we want to create a curriculum which says to the children that Spanish is beautiful, that being Latin American, Latinx… that being a *Texan* is beautiful" (P. Egret, personal communication, June 8, 2022). He went on to explain the exclusion non-native speakers may feel in the classroom, and the necessity to actively seek ways to welcome those children, posing "there will already be an overrepresentation of whiteness in your classrooms. So how are you going to intentionally welcome those who aren't?" (P. Egret, personal communication, June 8, 2022).

The conversation shifted from child-created stories to the use of books to help children feel represented in the classroom. The teachers were then asked to become familiar with a variety of books that celebrate diversity and represent traditionally marginalized groups. There were a number of books, all written from diverse perspectives, with titles too numerous to count. Some were written in English, some in other languages, and some were a blend of languages (see Figure 4-6). Some titles included:

The Streets Are Free by Kurusa

What Can You Do With a Paleta? by Carmen Tafolla

Luis Paints the World by Terry Faith

Maybe Something Beautiful by F. Isabel Campoy

Kitchen Dance by Maurie J. Manning

Julian at the Wedding by Jessica Love

Kikiriki Quiquiriqui by Por Diane de Anda

May Your Life be Deliciosa by Michael Genhart and Loris Lora

La Frontera – El viaje con papa (My Journey with Papa) by Deborah Mills

That's Not Fair – Emma Tenayuca's Struggle for Justice by Carmen Tafolla

Soldier for Equality by Duncan Tonatium

Nino Wrestles the World by Yuyi Morales

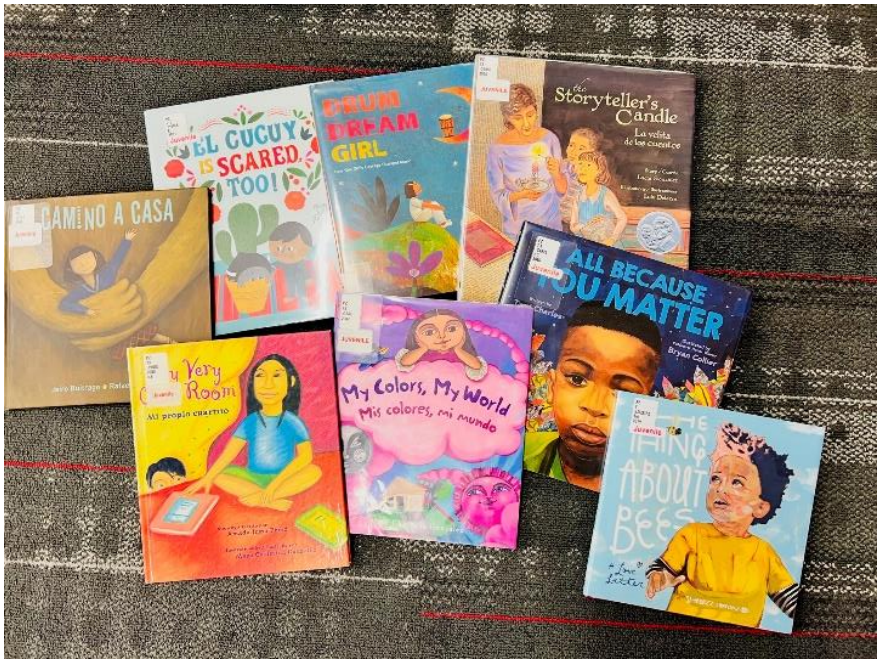

Figure 4-6. *Inclusive Books*

As the teachers read the books to themselves, they were asked to reflect on the process with their fellow cohort. Their conversations gave me insight into their evolution of thought. One group of participants discussed the use of such books as conversation starters with their young children. Lilly, an in-service teacher, suggested, "it gives us different talking points – like how do you celebrate your birthday? Because there is so much culture in that." Another participant pointed to the book he was reading, "this one is interesting because it talks about crossing borders. We could ask the children about different borders – classroom walls, fences…" (Arlo, in-service teacher). His peer jumped in "yeah, you could even talk about crossing state lines, county lines, or having family that lives out of state" (Lilly). The conversation continued to

evolve, as the professor invited everyone to begin to dig deeper. He asked the teachers to reflect, as they read the books, to ask themselves "whose stories are being told? Who is telling the story? Do the stories marginalize? Victimize? Stereotype? Are they telling stories of white dominance? Or are they disrupting that dominance?" (P. Egret, personal communication, June 8, 2022). He went on to explain the importance of ownership and authenticity in representation, and in the value of having your voice heard and your story told (a theme previously emphasized by the guest speaker). "Just because these are stories about historically marginalized communities, is it *actually* celebrating these people? Whose narrative is this putting forward?" (P. Egret, personal communication, June 8, 2022).

As the teachers paused, another professor challenged them – "continue to dig deeper and have these conversations – even if it's a book written in a different language – use pictures, help each other, work together" (E. Smith, personal communication, June 8, 2022). As the teachers began to engage with the texts, I noticed a group, in particular, seeming to struggle together through a text (see Figure 4-7). This particular book was not written in their language, the text was minimal, and the illustrations were abstract. Hearing them work together to solve the text piqued my interest, so I stepped closer to get a better understanding of their thought process.

Figure 4-7. *Book Work*

It appeared as though the teachers were struggling with the concept of the book, yet, at the same time, were intrigued by it - “The dynamics of the city… and the diversity… it’s beautiful. This is a deep book,” Sloane, an in-service teacher, suggested. Still, even enraptured by the book, there was confusion between them. Questions began to arise. “Is this an interpretation of what the author thinks, or does it open us up to add what we think?” Sloane asked her peers. The pages without text continued to add to the confusion. “There are no words on this page. It’s almost like they want you to interpret it for yourself” (Sloane). Others nodded in agreement, as she offered her interpretation, perhaps that “all families are different. We come from different backgrounds” (Sloane). Another participant questioned, “how can we bring that into the classroom? How can we let them know that they are appreciated here?” (Ashley, in-service teacher). Julie, an in-service teacher, seemed to come to a realization. “Incarceration station! …That’s why he is a lion, because people are afraid of lions, just like people are afraid of convicts. Think about the symbolism you could teach. And look at his cage! It looks like a jail cell!” Sloane offered a different interpretation, asking “is it alluding to the fact that some people think of school as jail?” The teachers paused, as Julie came to another conclusion, “or maybe he’s a factory worker – they’re all wearing uniforms in some kind of blue.” As they struggled through interpretation, a professor stepped in, “this could be a working family, a struggling family. Think about all the children who might relate to it” (E. Smith, personal communication, June 8, 2022). The conversation drew the attention of another professor, who used the moment to show the teachers how valuable books like this can be in the classroom, to invite conversation and interpretation, rather than offer a limited perspective on a culture. “That’s the beauty of a book like this,” he offered. “Often books have so much text that it takes away opportunities for interpretation or conversation. But this book does such a nice job of opening us up” (P. Egret,

personal communication, June 8, 2022). With that, the conversation came to a close, and so did the third day of teacher preparation work.

June 9, 2022

The fourth day of the teacher preparation part of the workshop was focused primarily on housekeeping items. Due to a COVID spread amongst a few of the teachers, the university faculty decided to meet online via zoom, to slow the spread and to allow time for the teachers to test before coming back to campus.

The online professional development session began with a discussion on the importance of open-ended materials. The teachers were invited to watch a short video clip of a previous summer workshop participant who had created a boat using donated recyclables and other materials. As the teachers watched, one professor asked them to consider taking on the child's perspective as they worked with the materials, asking them to "attempt to see what the children see when they envision these projects. They see beauty… and value… in these materials, where all we see is junk" (P. Egret, personal communication, June 9, 2022). He then asked the teachers to consider the source of the materials and the endless possibilities they provided for the children. "As you look at the materials," he started, "think about how those materials came into the world, and then how they got into the hands of these children" (P. Egret, personal communication, June 9, 2022). After the video ended, the conversation shifted into practical ways the teachers could provide open-ended materials for the children at the workshop (and, ultimately, for their classroom, as well). One professor introduced the teachers to a local organization dedicated to sparking creativity through the reuse of materials. The mission of this repurposing organization is to "[foster] conservation and reuse through creativity, education, and community building." The organization, pictured below, rescues thousands of materials from

entering the landfill each year, connecting those resources to local schools and organizations to be repurposed by children and adults, alike (see Figure 4-8).

Donate

Whether you donate materials or money, rest assured that your resources are in good hands. We divert over 97% of the materials donated to us from the landfill on an annual basis, all on a shoestring budget.

Figure 4-8. *Repurposing Organization*

The teachers were given time to look through the website and the materials, and brainstorm ways they could use those materials in the spaces of the summer workshop. The professor also invited the teachers to come to the organization as they prepared for the coming week of work with the children. After browsing through all that the organization offered, the cohort continued to share ideas and resources with each other on places that they could go to find open-ended materials for the children.

Following this discussion, the teachers were asked to consider the open-ended projects that they had made a few days prior, as part of their teacher preparation work. The professor shared a slide show of some of their creations, and asked them to speak up about things that they had learned in the process. One participant mentioned the closeness she felt with her cohort, while also feeling a sense of pride in her work. After looking at the photos of herself, working alongside her cohort, Lilly, an in-service teacher, noted, “it was interesting how we could all be working so closely together, yet we weren’t overcrowding.” Another in-service teacher, Arlo, recalled his experience working with the materials. He mentioned that when he started his

creation, he wanted to make a scene of a movie that he liked. There was a scene in the movie where the main character gets caught in a dark room, so he was trying to use the materials to recreate the set. As he was working, one of the other participants (Samantha, in-service teacher) came up and began to work with him. Through the process of working together, he learned that she was really interested in prop-making and set-design and she helped him to develop the set with pieces that he would have never thought or been able to design on his own. A professor noted the significance of the event, how working together with the open-ended materials, the two were able to learn something new about each other (T. Callahan, personal communication, June 9, 2022). It appeared as though the open-ended experiences were valuable to the teachers, as they learned firsthand the benefits of play-based learning.

The teachers were then asked to work in small groups to go back and document the process of making their creations. This activity was meant to help them practice the documentation of play, a required component of the workshop. Students were given a documentation form, and asked to *treasure hunt* for the related learning standards. As they considered their own process of learning, they were also asked to think about the standards that are met as children play. This same process would be practiced throughout the workshop weeks with the children. One pre-service teacher drew a connection to fine arts, noting the standard "child uses a variety of art materials and activities for sensory experience and exploration" (Clara). Another teacher drew connections to early literacy standards – "I feel like that even directly connects to early writing for our kids," he started. "The ability to story-tell impacts their willingness to own their own voice as a writer and empowers them to actually write down their stories in whatever form that might be in" (Arlo, in-service teacher). Sloane, another in-service teacher, felt that playing with open-ended materials helped the children develop socio-

emotionally, noting that "independence and self-confidence [are] so important for these young learners!" Another participant suggested "…it gives multiple opportunities for kids to show us what they know in the way they learn best (not one size fits all). This is something I think the [standards] are lacking" (Megan, in-service teacher). A professor joined in the conversation. "Exactly," she started, "not only is constructive play a way to get to know our students, their lives are built right into the standards" (T. Callahan, personal communication, June 9, 2022). It appeared as though the teachers' gears were shifting more toward a holistic way of observing the children. While they recognized the importance of the standards, they found ways, creatively, to meet those standards through play. This exercise helped them to see how they could reverse design their curriculum to ensure that their children were meeting the standards, while also developing holistically through play.

June 10, 2022

The last day of teacher preparation work was focused on setting up the learning environment for the summer workshop. The teachers were asked to pull from what they had learned throughout their readings and discussions to set up the environment in a way that would invite children to participate. Teachers worked with their assigned teams to set up designated spaces that would also serve as their homerooms. As the teachers designed their rooms, I engaged them in informal interviews and conversations to try to understand their thinking.

The first group I observed was working diligently to set up the constructive lab play space. This space was stocked with a number of donated, recycled, and other open-ended materials. The teachers, working together, tried to come up with a design that would best support student learning. Lilly (in-service teacher) asked, "Should [the shelf] be in the middle, with tables around it, so that they have access to all of the materials?" Isabel (in-service teacher)

responded, “yes, I love that – that way they can reach the materials as they are working together.” They also began to question whether or not they would like to have chairs next to the tables and if it would be conducive to creative work or prohibitive. They discussed the advantages and disadvantages of having chairs, and it was decided that chairs may serve as an invitation for children to spend some time engrossed in a project. “Maybe some chairs…” Isabel suggested, “to invite the kiddos to stay awhile and work on projects.” The conversation then started to shift toward the materials in the room and whether or not they should be organized. After some thought, Lilly decided, “maybe we should sort the materials out first, so that they know what they have to work with.”

The in-service teacher started to explain her thought process to her peers, noting how she had organized her prekindergarten classroom this year. This particular participant was one of 17 graduate fellows at the university. The fellowship program, unique it its design, gave first year teachers the opportunity to pursue their master’s degree, while also conducting research in their classrooms, with ongoing supervision and support. This teacher had previous experience with the use of open-ended materials, and she was eager to see what the children at the workshop would come up with. “This was my kids’ favorite part of the room last year,” she told us. “I wish we didn’t have to have limits (small group number size, due to the pandemic), but they would just have to wait their turn,” Lilly explained. She went on to express the frustration she felt. “It was so sad. I wish I could’ve given them *more* time” (Lilly). The teachers continued to talk about the use of open-ended materials in the classroom. One participant noted how chaotic it could get with so many children having access to all of the recyclables, and how that feels counterintuitive to her organizational nature. “My organizational-self is twitching,” she laughed. “But I’m like ‘I’m fine – we’re fine. They’re learning – they’re listening…” (Lilly).

The other group members identified with her sentiment and wondered whether or not they should set limits on the access of the materials, even just for the sake of replenishment. One teacher was concerned that they may not have enough to keep the children busy for the next few weeks. There were concerns of wasting materials and wanting to make sure the children actually used the materials they pulled. “I’m just thinking, my kids go through these materials so fast” Lilly told us. Her peer agreed, “yeah, we may need to replenish” (Isabel). As they were talking, another teacher walked up, after emptying a bag of materials, and asked if she should throw anything away. One participant responded, “No! Girl, not in this room!” (Lilly). Her peer responded, “they could use that. Put it over there by the plastic stuff” (Isabel). It appeared as though the waste of any kind of materials was concerning to the group. Instead, they seemed to see the potential in the objects, much like the ideas that had been discussed throughout their teacher preparation work.

As they continued to unpack the room, an interesting conversation took place, surrounding the use of stencils in the play and inquiry workshop. One participant wondered if those would be considered open-ended or structured, as stencils, by design, were intended, *technically,* for one purpose. The teachers discussed the nature of unstructured play, and if it was defined by the materials themselves, or *in the use* of the materials. That is, could anything be considered unstructured, if used in an unconventional way? “I mean, they have a structured use – to measure things,” Lilly started, “but the kids use them in unstructured ways. So is it all just about how the materials are used?” Her peers nodded in agreement. It was evident, by the discussions taking place between the teachers that they were trying to intertwine everything they had learned throughout their teacher preparation work into their room design (see Figures 4-9 and 4-10).

Figure 4-9. *Constructive Play Space*

Figure 4-10. *Constructive Play Materials*

As I shifted into the next room, I noticed a participant on his tiptoes, taping butcher paper to the wall. Intrigued, I walked in and engaged him in conversation. He told me that the butcher paper would be used as an invitation for the children to create murals. He paired the paper with

crayons and markers, and then began taping cardboard paper to the floor to serve as a paint guard. I asked the teacher if they had ever done anything like this. He told me that he was also a graduate fellow, but that he worked with 2nd graders. He was looking for ways to bring unconventional learning into the classroom and felt like play-based learning was important for all learners, regardless of age. He went on to tell me of the research he was doing in his own classroom, which was focused on a particular style of student-centered story-writing. I asked if he was familiar with the Vivian Paley style of story writing and story acting, and he said that he had had some prior experience with it, but had forgotten about her approach until being refreshed on it, and the value that it has in the classroom, during the professional development week. "I'm hearing and seeing it again," he told me, "and I'm thinking 'Ah, man, why didn't I do that with my class last year? It's such an authentic way to introduce the skill… definitely something that I want to try with them next year" (Arlo, in-service teacher).

He went on to explain his perspective on play, and how undervalued he felt that it is, especially in mainstream classrooms. Even with a supportive administration, he explained, he feels like "it's looked down upon, or like it's a joke, but it's so valuable" (Arlo). He spoke of the urgency to advocate for play, even seeing himself as a change agent – "I'd love to like take this data to my administration and share these ideas and change the way we teach second grade," he started, "like to make it open like this, with a set time each day for the kids to play" (Arlo). As I watched him work, I noticed a variety of materials and paints and papers lining the shelves. A few piqued my interest, so I pressed him on his thoughts. He pointed out that they wanted to allow children to be creative in unconventional ways. To do this, they had included non-traditional items to be used in place of paint brushes (e.g., toothbrushes, spoons and forks, and

even items from nature were included in the mix). I was beginning to see this same theme recurring – a shared idea of unconventional play (see Figures 4-11 and 4-12).

Figure 4-11. *Art Room*

Figure 4-12. *Art Room Materials*

As I wandered down the hallway, I noticed a few teachers sitting on the floor, sorting through a box of mismatched nails. I asked them what they were doing, and they told me that they were responsible for the setup of the woodworking area. I asked if they had ever done any

kind of woodworking with children – one participant laughed "I have never done any kind of wood working at all!" (Rosita, in-service teacher). As the giggles settled, I asked them how they were feeling about working with these kinds of tools and materials with early childhood students. The workshop prides itself on allowing children to engage in risky play – a type of play thought to help children learn to manage risk in safe and developmentally appropriate ways. Likely, one of the most controversial areas of the workshop, is woodworking. Allowing three-year-olds the chance to play freely with hammers and nails and saws seemed to cause some reservation amongst the teachers, unlike anything else in the workshop. One participant mentioned that she would never allow her children to do this in the classroom – "Honestly," she told me, "my kids last year were kind of crazy and I could not imagine letting them go with this stuff" (Chloe, in-service teacher). Another teacher concurred, "Yeah, I would never do that in my classroom. My kids would stab each other with scissors, let alone saws and screw drivers" (Rosita). The giggles erupted again, and I sensed a sort of calm come over them. I asked them, honestly, how they were feeling about all of this and if they had any reservations. One participant, opened up, admitting her own curiosity, as well as her concern for the children's safety. "I'm actually kind of scared… but also excited," she started. "I'm curious to see how it goes and *if* they can handle it" (Chloe). Unlike the other rooms I had visited, there seemed to be less optimism surrounding the unstructured idea of play in this particular space of the workshop. Before I left, I collected a few photos of the tools and materials that would be available to the children. Items included safety goggles and gloves, measuring tapes, straight edges and squares, sandpaper, wood glue, hammers, saws, nails, and piles and piles of fresh two-by-fours, all waiting to be cut (see Figures 4-13 and 4-14).

Figure 4-13. *Woodworking Tools*

Figure 4-14. *Woodworking Equipment*

The next room I visited, would be known as Boxville. As the name suggests, this was a room filled with a variety of boxes for the children to play with. What was interesting to me, when I stepped into the room, was the lack of organization in the room, especially when

compared to the other rooms I had visited. Boxville, was just what it sounded like. As I walked in, there were about a hundred boxes lining the left side of the room. There seemed to be no rhyme or reason, or really any kind of organizational system. I asked the teachers if they had a method behind their madness, and they explained that they had wanted the room to be intentionally unstructured. "So we intentionally left it kind of open and unstructured," Tracy, a pre-service teacher, told me. "We just felt like there's not much we can do to organize it. We're going to kind of just let them take over." As I looked to the other side of the room, I noticed a few round tables with fabric scraps, crayons and markers, and rolls and rolls of blue tape. They explained that those items were meant to extend the children's play and to help them elaborate their structures. "Yeah, we [gave] them some kinds of fabric and tape and things," Anne (in-service teacher) explained, "to kind of decorate their boxes."

As I gave the room a second glance, I also noticed a seemingly random assortment of baby dolls. In my confusion, I wondered if the dolls had been misplaced, or if they served some kind of purpose in the room. One pre-service teacher explained that the dolls were meant to help encourage the children to engage in dramatic play as they designed their box creations – "we also have some baby dolls so that they can play house," she told me. "That way, they aren't just building ships and boats and buildings" (Tracy). It appeared as though there was a method behind their madness, a method derived from theory. Whether from Piaget (1999), Vygotsky (1978), or a combination of approaches, it was clear that the teachers were setting up an environment of constructive play – unconventional at times, but intentionally so (see Figures 4-15 and 4-16).

Figure 4-15. *Boxville*

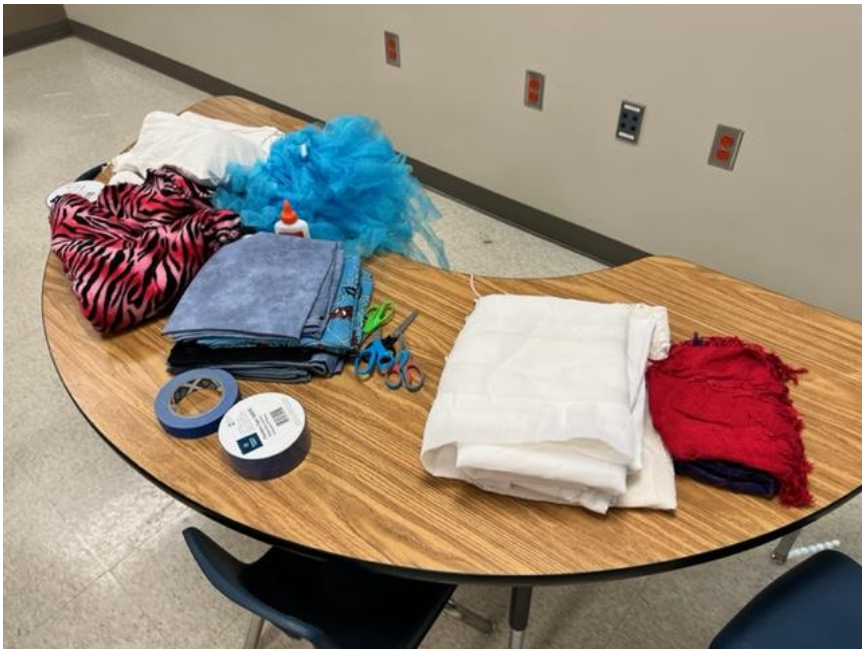

Figure 4-16. *Boxville Materials*

The teachers in charge of the Block Room shared similar thought processes. As I walked in, I noticed all of the blocks pushed to the edges of the room, rather than used as room dividers, as so many early childhood classrooms do. I asked the teachers why they had chosen this open

concept, rather than a more traditional design. Like the teachers in Boxville, they were trying to be intentional with the space they were providing for their young builders – "We wanted open space to build," Reyna (in-service teacher) told me. Another participant agreed, "when I think of building, I want to be able to spread out on the floor" (Gabriela, in-service teacher). Another teacher offered a slightly different perspective, noting that they also wanted to include tables for the children to be able to engage in smaller kinds of building projects. "We also have wood scraps for ramp making (indicating that they could be propped against the tables), and we have tables for small blocks, so that we give them options," Lila (in-service teacher) explained. Blocks came in all shapes and sizes. There were standard building sets, cardboard blocks, and even blocks made out of recycled materials. To extend the children's block play, the teachers had also included a number of play vehicles, balls, and other manipulatives (see Figures 4-17 and 4-18).

Figure 4-17. *Block Room*

Figure 4-18. *Wood Scraps for Block Room*

One of the last classrooms I was able to visit was busy preparing the Storytelling/Story-Acting and Book Making/Book Acting room. This room included cozy spaces for the children to read, tables for the children to write and dictate their stories, and multiple stages, designated by blue tape, for the children to come and act out their stories. I was intrigued by the use of multiple stages in the classroom (as I had only been familiar with having one stage), so I asked the teachers what they had planned for the other stages. One participant, Josie (pre-service teacher), explained that they thought it would be helpful for children who may be less patient; by having multiple stages, the children would not have to wait (possibly losing interest). Instead, they could tell stories simultaneously. Another participant, Elena (in-service teacher), suggested that it could also be helpful for children who may speak other languages, so that they could have stories being dictated in English and Spanish simultaneously. I asked the teachers if they had ever tried this storytelling method with children before, but none of them had. Apart from the practice they had had during the teacher preparation week, they had not had the opportunity to engage in this

process. I asked them how they were feeling, and one pre-service teacher, Kara, responded that she was “nervous, but also excited.” (see Figure 4-19).

Figure 4-19. *Storytelling Room*

As the teachers finished getting their rooms prepared for the coming week, they were asked to work collaboratively to think of all the learning and standards that were being met as the children played. These posters would be displayed in each room, reminding teachers and parents alike, of the value of an unstructured play environment (see Figure 4-20).

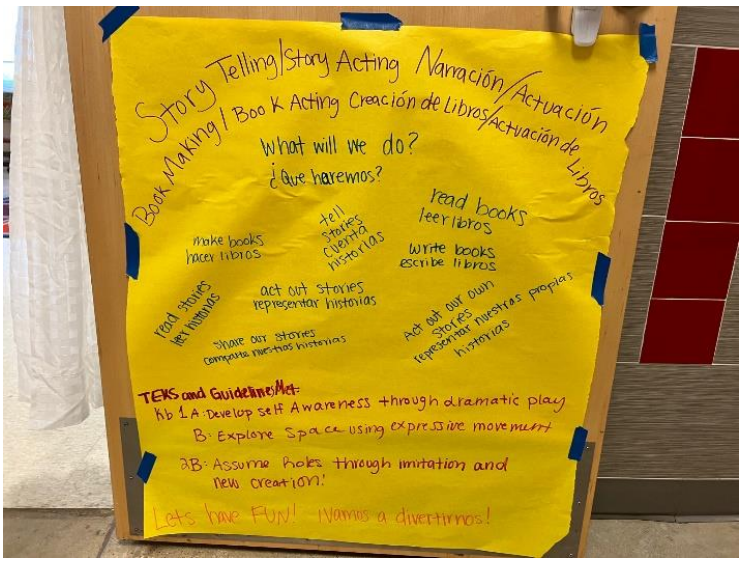

Figure 4-20. *Standards Met Through Play*

The Play and Inquiry Workshop

June 13, 2022

After a week of professional development and teacher preparation, the summer workshop welcomed in children from the community. The teachers seemed nervous, but also excited. The children, likewise, seemed to display a similar mix of emotions. The hallways were bustling as little ones arrived at school to be greeted by the university students (i.e., both undergraduate [pre-service] and graduate [in-service] teachers). Each child was given a felt name tag, which designated them to a homeroom. As the children were walked to their homeroom, they were welcomed by a book, one of the few exhibits of teacher-led activities at the workshop. The books had been intentionally distributed to the teachers the week before. Each book was meant to help create a more culturally inclusive classroom. Teachers were encouraged to greet the children, both in Spanish and English, and to continue to switch between the two languages as often as possible. This was done in an effort to help the children feel comfortable in the classroom, and celebrated for who they are. As the books were read, I took note of the interactions between the teachers and children. While the book was chosen by the teacher, the children seemed to be very involved in the read-aloud process. While in some teacher-directed classrooms, child disruptions might be discouraged, at the workshop, interruptions were valued as a platform to encourage conversation, commonness, and even classroom community. As the teachers read aloud, the children listened, offering their own little perspectives at the turn of each page. The book opened up conversation between the children, as they each became more comfortable with eachother, as well as in their new environment.

As the homeroom teachers wrapped up reading their books, the professors asked that they begin to open their doors and walk the children into the hallway so that they could see all of the

spaces of the workshop, and so that they understood that they had the freedom to come and go as they chose to play freely thoughout the day. As the teachers corralled their children, a burst of language erupted, and we could hardly tell who was saying what. One participant, Tori (pre-service teacher), approached another teacher and asked, "Do you know what the Spanish word is for 'follow me'?" The other teacher, not sure of what to say, and looking for a way to reach the children, responded, "just use gestures" (Lilly, in-service teacher). As the two worked together to communicate with the children, one teacher had a realization, "maybe ¡Vámonos! – does that mean 'let's go?'" (Lilly). Whether by word or example, the teachers led the group of children into the hallway and introduced them to all of the spaces of the workshop. Children, finding interest in different rooms, began to break away from their groups to explore. I followed a group of children and teachers outside.

As I walked outside, I was taken aback by a small boy running haphazardously with a saw. He seemed to be thrusting the saw in the air like a sword. Though he was not aiming for any particular child, his blade nearly came in contact with more than a few children. The teachers, seeming almost paralyzed with concern, were not sure *if* or *how* to interevene. As I engaged a teacher in conversation, she expressed that she was "very nervous" (Chloe, in-service teacher) about the children engaging in this kind of play. The boy with the saw soon found interest in something else, and the teachers, relieved, began to engage with the children at the woodworking table. Some children worked independently, while others requested more support. The teachers stepped in, as needed, but for the most part allowed the children to explore on their own. There was another child working at the table, who seemed concerned with the way some of the children were using the tools (particularly the boy who had been running). As he held his saw steadily against his piece of wood, he said to his teacher, "you have to be careful with a saw." His teacher

responded, “Saws are not toys, right? They’re real tools” (Chloe). The child nodded in agreement, as he focused on his woodworking project. The teacher, seeing that he was struggling to manage the cumbersome piece of wood, offered to hold it steady so that he could use both hands for cutting. As she took a sigh of relief, that the child who had been running had moved on to another area of interest, I asked her how she was handling this kind of learning environment. She said that despite the initial concern for safety, the children, overall, had been doing well with risk management – “They’re all doing pretty good with it. No one is hurt… so far…” Chloe laughed (see Figures 4-21 and 4-22).

Figure 4-21. *Woodworking, Day One, Sawing*

Figure 4-22. *Woodworking, Day One, Table Work*

As I moved on to another area of the workshop, I found myself immersed in a sea of English and Spanish storytellers. One participant, Elena (in-service teacher), worked with a small group of children as they engaged in the bookmaking process. These stories had already been told, and the children were working to bind their paper books with carboard and ribbon. This step in the process is what the workshop describes as *publishing.* The cardboard fashioning of the books, derived from a copy-left movement across the world (making, literally, anyone who writes a story, a published author) is a staple of the workshop – they refer to it as *cartón-era.*

Across the room, I took note of a pre-service teacher, Josie, working one-on-one with a child who wanted to dictate a story. The story, written completely in Spanish, seemed to be told rather quickly, with elements that repeated over and over again. The teacher, tried her best to keep up with the pace of the child, asking her to slow down at times, and even to repeat words more slowly so that she could try to spell them out. I approached the teacher later, unsure as to whether or not she was a Spanish speaker. She laughed and told me that she knew very little. She was trying her best to make out the elements of the story, and said it had something to do with a little girl and a bowl of soup. We laughed, and we talked about the multilingual aspects of the program, and she explained that although it could be challenging at times, it was so rewarding to see how proud the children were to hear their stories read aloud – "it makes all the difference" Josie told me (see Figure 4-23).

Figure 4-23. *Storytelling, English and Spanish*

As I moved into the block area, I noticed similar ideas surrounding the use of language in a play-oriented space. One in-service teacher described her early experiences of working with children who did not speak the same language as her. “It’s so interesting how they pull you into their play,” Lila (in-service teacher) told me. She went on to explain how a little boy had asked her to come sit with him. When she started to engage in play with him, he began to hold up different toys and teach her how to say the words in Spanish. It was as if their roles were reversed: the teacher became the student, and the child became the teacher. We began to talk about the languages represented at the workshop and if she felt that there were certain benefits or barriers to learning in a multicultural environment, both in respect to teacher/child relationships, as well as child-to-child interactions. Another participant joined our conversation and expressed that she felt that the children found commonalities in play – “I’m so surprised how well the children interact,” she started. “It’s like they don’t see any differences. They just become friends and play together” (Lauren, pre-service teacher). She went on to explain how the children would either communicate nonverbally (by using gestures) or try to teach each other words in their

native language. In other words, the children were engaging in creative problem-solving, not only through play, but in their efforts to communicate through play - “I’m blown away by how *creative* they are,” Lila (in-service teacher) expressed (see Figure 4-24).

Figure 4-24. *Block Room, Creative Play*

As I walked down the hallway, I noticed a small group of boys working together to carry a large box out of the art room to dry. The box, connected with a variety of tapes and glue, was completely *dripping* in red paint “because,” *as the children told her*, “it was being bombed” (Rachel, pre-service teacher). As the little red drops settled to the floor, their teacher began to tell me the story behind the creation that had started in Boxville, and worked its way into the art room – “they told me they had a helmet (she points to a fishnet fashioned together in the shape of a dome), and I asked if it was protecting them from aliens,” she laughed. “He put his arm on me and said, ‘honey, from the *entire universe*’” (Rachel). The rocket ship, as it became to be known, included a laser beam and propellors, made from recycled cardboard tubes and plastic PVC pipe scraps (see Figure 4-25).

Figure 4-25. *The Rocket Ship*

There were a number of other creative projects that started in other areas of the workshop and then were brought to completion in the art room. Children worked diligently with wood, cardboard, and other open-ended materials to express themselves, as well as to solve problems. In one corner of the room, children were painting directly on the easels, and then using paper to make an impression. They were baffled by the way the artwork would mirror itself onto the paper. Whether the children came to this conclusion on their own or were nudged in that direction by a teacher, I do not know. I only know that the process was contagious; the more the children engaged in the activity, the more other children would want to create impressions on their own. This idea of unconventional play seemed to have made its way into the art room, as well. Rather than paper meeting paintbrush, the paintbrush met the easel. Yet the paper was still bursting with color. The children, in awe, repeated the process again, and again, and again (see Figure 4-26). Intrigued, I had to continually remind myself of the biases I bring into this space – my valuation of play, especially, and how my presence, and even enthusiasm at times, might impact the important work that takes place here. As best as I can, I try to mitigate that.

Figure 4-26. *Process Painting*

In the midst of creative painting, I noticed another child working diligently with open-ended materials. His teacher explained that he had created a fly catcher. I watched as she engaged with him – "So the fly lands here, and then what happens next?" Megan, an in-service teacher, asked. The child demonstrated where the fly would land and how the small cup would come up like a trap. Rather than praising the child with a phrase like "good job," the teacher began to verbally map his thinking – "so the fly lands here, and then the cup goes up like this?" she started. The child nodded, and she continued, "oh, I see how that works…" (Megan). Verbal mapping, as mentioned previously, is a skill taught to the teachers in the professional development week; it focuses on noticing the child's effort, rather than praising the final product. This strategy helps to emphasize the *process* of learning, rather than the *product.* The child, beaming with delight, went over to continue work on his fly trap (see Figure 4-27).

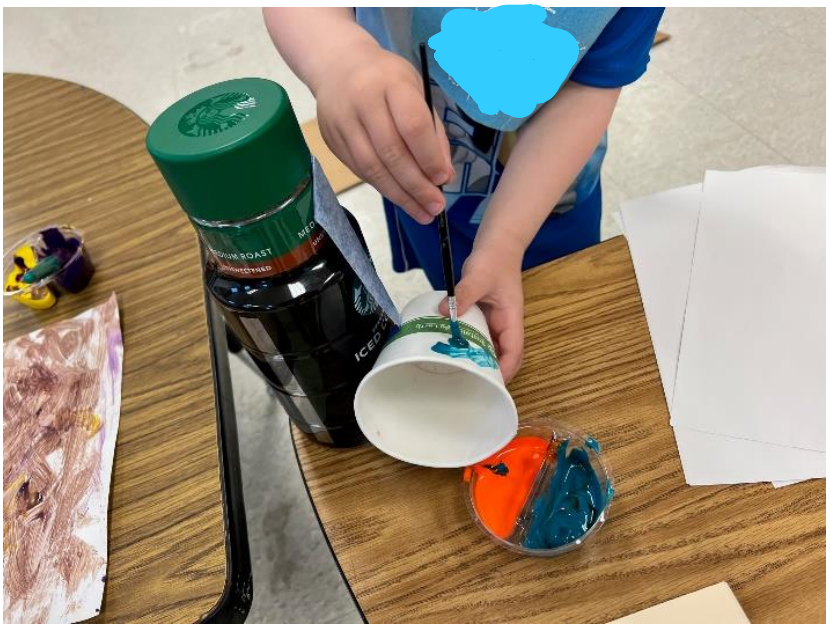

Figure 4-27. *Fly Trap*

My attention was then drawn to a little girl who seemed to be in the midst of conflict in the art room. The girl, clearly upset, was approached by her teacher – "are you sure you don't want to talk to him?" Arlo (in-service teacher) asked. He knelt down and began to demonstrate how to problem-solve – "you can [get] down here at his eye-level so that he can see you. I can help you talk to him if you want," Arlo modeled. The little girl ran out of the room, and I engaged the participant for more information. Apparently the girl had built a wooden structure outside, had brought it in to paint, and when she left it on the floor to get her supplies, another child stepped in and began to paint her structure. The teacher explained that, rather than face any conflict, the girl ran off. When she came back in the room, she explained that she decided she would rather let the other child have her structure. Instead, she made herself a newer version. The teacher mentioned that it was interesting how quickly she would give in to avoid conflict, and that he wanted to step in more, but also wanted to allow her the space to work it out – "I just want her to speak up for herself," he told me (Arlo). When the child entered into the room with her new creation, she placed it carefully away from the other children (see Figure 4-28). The

teacher and I exchanged looks; it was clear that the child, in an effort to avoid further conflict, was trying a new strategy this time.

Figure 4-28. *Child Avoids Conflict*

Only a few moments later, we noticed another child in the midst of conflict. She had clipped a piece of paper to her easel, put on an art smock, and was in the process of collecting paints for her masterpiece (see Figure 4-29). As she leaned left and right, looking for new paints (while also carefully guarding her workspace), another child (a boy much older and physically bigger) shoved his way into her workspace. He firmly told the girl that he wanted to paint. The teacher and I looked at each other (both clearly fighting the urges to step in). The girl, passively, said "Hey, that's mine. That's my paper." The boy continued to press in on her. She said again (more loudly and firmly), "Hey, I'm painting." The boy backed off and looked at the teacher for help. The teacher offered the boy a different easel with a new sheet of paper, and he happily went on his way. After things settled down, I asked the participant how he knew when to step in and when to step back. He said that it was a difficult balance, and he was still learning how to intervene appropriately. He also applauded the little girl for standing up for what she wanted – "it's *so* hard not to step in and intervene," he told me. "She did so good though!" (Arlo). The art

room, especially, seemed to be a space where children were growing and developing socially; whether they were expressing themselves in creative ways, working together collaboratively on various projects of their choosing, or working through conflict, the children were learning the ins and outs of social interaction (a skill not normally observed in classrooms which look at development through isolated skillsets).

Figure 4-29. *Child Confronts Conflict*

June 14, 2022

Walking through the hallways the second day of the workshop, I noticed a teacher, trying his best to lure children into the storytelling room. A child, I came to learn, had written a story, but did not have enough friends in the classroom to act it out. The teacher, wanting to help the child bring the story to life, decided that instead of waiting for children to come to him, he would step into the hallway and look for recruits (see Figure 4-30). “Hey, do you want to come be in a story?” he asked one child, who walked away uninterested; He persisted, “Hey, you’re wearing an orange shirt! Would you like to be the sun in our story?!” (Arlo, in-service teacher). After a few failed attempts, he was finally able to cast the crew. The children followed him in as he described the essence of the story that had been written. They decided on roles to play, and sat

around a small carpet “stage” to watch the story unfold. The story itself was a mix between Spanish and English, and I had a hard time following the sequence of events. I wondered whether the children who were not fluent in both languages struggled to follow the plot, but their involvement in the story told me otherwise. They moved in and out of the story, stepping in to fulfill their roles, the teachers offering support as best they could. When a child would freeze, the teacher would ask questions to help get them thinking about their part – “what would rain look like? … how does a baby act? … how could we make a house with our bodies?” she asked the children (Megan, in-service teacher). These questions allowed the children to think about their actions before they jumped into their role. Rather than model to the children how to act, the teachers waited, asked questions, and verbally mapped the children’s actions as they stepped into the scene (see Figure 4-31).

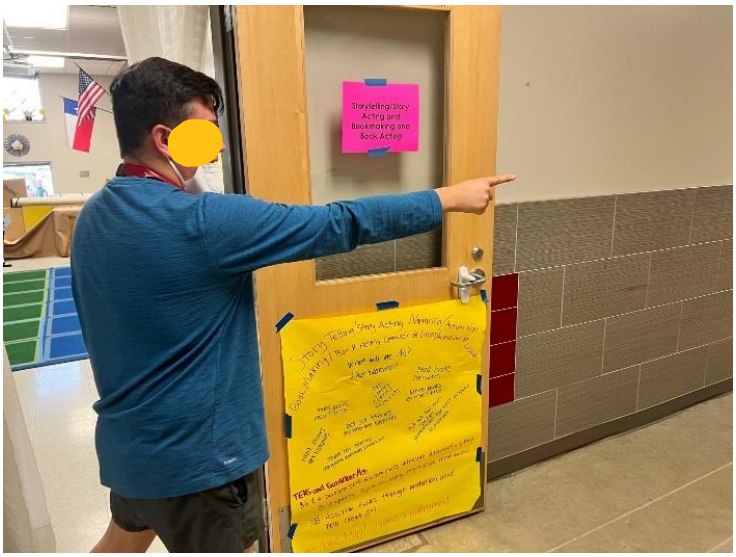

Figure 4-30. *Teacher Recruits Actors*

Figure 4-31. *Teachers in Storytelling*

Again, I feel compelled to acknowledge my bias, especially in the way that Paley (1979-2014) has influenced my perspective as a teacher-researcher. Her work, critical to the research at hand, cannot help but filter my lens in this space. Still, storytelling seemed to bring children of all walks of life together, even those out on the outskirts of play. One child, I noticed, timidly entered the storytelling room. Rather than jump into a story unfolding or sit down to write a story of her own, she sat in a rocking chair, and took in the room around her. She was not intermingled with the other children. She observed their play, but was hesitant to join. Though she seemed content to take on the role of bystander in the classroom, one participant noticed her across the room and came over to engage her. “You doing okay?” Arlo (in-service teacher) asked. The child nodded. “You look like you might have a story to tell me” (Arlo). She gave him a sheepish smile, he grabbed his notebook, and the two began the storytelling process – she spoke, as he dictated her words verbatim. Beaming, after having written a story, another teacher asked if she would like to act it out or bind it together in a book. “Those are all your words, see?” Megan (in-service teacher) started. “Do you want to take your words and make a book?” (see Figure 4-32).

Figure 4-32. *Bookmaking*

I walked into constructive play, and noticed a little boy engaged in the process of stacking and balancing cups. The teachers were intrigued by his behavior, and watched as he moved on from stacking little manipulatives on the table, to stacking cups on the floor, and then transitioning to stack recycled cans on the floor. As they observed the joy he found in the process, they also observed another child who was less interested in what the child had built, and infinitely more interested in knocking it down. The boy would build, the other child would knock it down. The boy would build, the child would knock it down again. We watched the pattern repeat itself, for what seemed like forever, but was, in reality, probably only a few minutes. The teachers, unsure of whether or not to intervene, stood back to see what would unfold. One stepped closer, and almost looked as if she was going to say something, but then lost her nerve at the last minute or had a call of conscious to allow the children to problem-solve as independently as possible. After one final attempt to disassemble his creation, the boy spoke up, “hey, don’t knock this over.” The other child, taken aback, said nothing, and went on to play with something else, leaving the boy to his tower building (see Figure 4-33). As the children continued in play, I

approached the teacher who had seemed hesitant to intervene and she told me of her reservations about knowing when to step in and when to step back. “I wasn’t sure how he was going to handle that,” she told me. “It’s hard to wait” (Lauren, pre-service teacher). Again, we see play as an opportunity for children to work and solve problems independently. These social skills, so foundational to development, are not always addressed in a teacher-directed classroom, where learning is prescriptive and children have no autonomy. This space for play has shown us, time and time again, how children can develop holistically, if given the freedom to do so.

Figure 4-33. *Conflict in Constructive Play*

I worked my way into the cooking room, and found the children busy preparing the morning snack. On this particular day, they would make ham and cheese roll ups for their friends to enjoy. As I walked in, I noticed a handful of children layering the bread with cheese and ham, then rolling it up and squeezing the air out of the bread. The rolls were then transferred to another table, where they were cut in half by a *more than willing* volunteer. The little boy who was eager to cut with a real knife was working alongside a teacher who was less than comfortable with the situation. I watched her, wincing at each attempt, taking a sigh of relief at

each successful cut that did not end in blood (see Figure 4-34). “You did it!” she said, while also whispering under her breath, “I’m gonna have a heart attack” (Jane, in-service teacher). I laughed, and began to watch them closer. She began to put a safety system into place – “okay, show me safe hands (knife on the table). I hold. You cut. Okay, show me safe hands (knife on the table)….” (Jane). The process would repeat a hundred times; although the child grew more competent with each cut, the teacher became no more comfortable with the situation. “Perfect. Beautiful cut,” she said. “Okay, next one… safe hands…” (Jane). The child, obviously aware of the teacher’s anxiety, engaged her. “Yeah, you do *not* want a cut like this” (raising his less dominant hand, displaying a large scrape from the day before). “How did you do that?” Jane asked. “A saw” the child replied. “Yeah, you have to be careful, right? That’s probably why you’re being so careful now” Jane started. “These are real tools, right?” The child agreed, and continued to cut, while the teacher sat nervously beside him.

Figure 4-34. *Child Cuts with Knife*

When they had finished no less than two hundred ham and cheese roll ups, I engaged the participant in conversation. I laughed, recalling events. She laughed, too, and then opened up

honestly. “It’s so nerve wracking,” she told me. “Because I know it’s good for them and that’s how they learn, right?” (Jane). I nodded, and continued to listen. “I mean, he cut his finger yesterday, so he was super careful today,” she started. “It just makes me nervous. I wish I could be more comfortable with it. I really want to be because I know they need those experiences. But at the same time, I don’t want to see that happen…” (Jane). Her fear was real, and not unwarranted. I observed similar concerns with teachers just the day before in the woodworking space. In fact, I had just had another conversation with a couple of in-service teachers who were torn on whether or not they should enforce a rule on shoe-wearing outside, as there were nails and jagged pieces of wood on the ground (Remy and Samantha). While they were concerned for the children’s safety, they explained that “until they were told otherwise, they were not intervening, even though that [was] contrary to how they [felt]” (Samantha). There seemed to be a fine line between wanting to protect the children, and wanting them to learn from experience, whether good or bad. Knowing when and how to intervene seemed to be something the teachers might become comfortable with over time; they were just not quite there yet.

June 15, 2022

The third day of the workshop started as it had before. Children came in, scouring the hallways for familiar friends, eager to find a place to play. Commotion drew me to the constructive play space. As I walked in, I could hardly separate trash from treasure. The room, already, was under construction. The floor was covered, almost entirely, with recycled materials about to take shape in one way or another. The children mapped their plans and brought their creations to life. It was chaotic, but not overwhelming. It was loud, but in a good way; the conversations between the children took over the room as they came together for this important work - the work of *play.* I was quickly approached by a teacher, whom I had met the day before.

This teacher had no connections to the university. Rather, he was a summer school teacher, employed by the school which hosts the summer workshop. In the mornings and late afternoons, he had a class of preschool children, all considered LEP. They took a break from their teacher-directed classroom from 8:30 - 11:30 am to play at the workshop. They would then return to their classrooms to finish the day. I was taken aback, as I really did not know the teacher very well. He was not formally part of the research study. Yet, he and I had talked the day before. He noticed that I was making notes and collecting photos of the children's creations and the teacher's interactions. As I took a photo of a bridge that I found to be cleverly constructed, he came over and engaged me in conversation. I told him how impressed I was with the children's ingenuity. "Oh, I did that" he explained (Jose, personal communication, June 14, 2022). I laughed and moved on to another railway that the children had scaffolded across two tables (see Figure 4-35). He followed me, "Oh, I did that too" he said (Jose, personal communication, June 14, 2022). I laughed as he went on to explain that he had been an engineer in Mexico before becoming a teacher a few years ago. He typically taught upper elementary children, at a school across town, but was employed for the summer at our campus. He explained that he wanted to show the children what could be done if they put their minds to something. Though he did not realize, he was acting as a director, overstepping at times into the children's play, causing them to rely too heavily on his input and expertise. Anyone familiar with play-theory understands that learning is so much more authentic when children discover something on their own, rather than being instructed on how to do it, or even worse, provided a direct model (to essentially copy). When we tell young children how to play, they rely on us to direct the play. When we step back, we are able to see their thought processes unfold. It is, essentially, a "sit on your hands" approach, a technique I had taken away from this very workshop nine summers earlier. However,

it seemed that Jose felt his role was to interject in the play, innocently enough, in an effort to show the children the possibilities in play. While his heart was in the right place, it was clear that he was not familiar with the approach. Knowing that he was not connected to the university, I did not feel the need to explain my thoughts on the subject. We shook hands and went on our way. I assumed that would be my last interaction with him.

However, the very next day, as I was engaging in the research at hand, he approached me again. This time, he wanted to show me a robot that he had made with the children (see Figure 4-36). "Am I doing something wrong?" he asked. "Am I overstepping boundaries?" (Jose, personal communication, June 15, 2022). Taken aback, I recalled our interactions from the day before. "Why do you ask?" I questioned. He went on to explain that he had thought he was in the right to move the play in a more innovative direction. His background in engineering, he explained again, moved him to jump into the play, to help the children create something worthwhile. He, like so many of the participants, struggled to know when to step in and offer support, and when to step back and watch the process unfold. It truly is a difficult balance, for a teacher of any season, but can be particularly hard for those who are new to this way of thought. He mentioned that after our interaction the day before, he was less sure if he was in the right. Today, as he built with the children, he offered ideas on the Robot, but gave the children space to create on their own (compared to building it himself the day before). I could see the gears turning for Jose, and I became intrigued by how his own perspective was shifting – not as a direct participant in the workshop, but as a participant on the outskirts of it. While he did not have to spend his days immersed in the children's play, he chose to. He was learning and growing as a teacher, indirectly, perhaps, but he was. I was struck by the power of the workshop, even on teachers who were not directly involved. I asked Jose if he and I could continue our conversations throughout

the duration of the workshop, so that I could better understand his perspective. He happily consented.

Figure 4-35. *Ramp in Block Play*

Figure 4-36. *Robot in Constructive Play*

I continued down the hallway, drawn into the cooking room, as so many other children were. “Mmmm, that smells good” one child said as she skipped down the hall to see what was cooking. I entered the room to find a number of children and teachers at work, busy preparing

the morning snack. This particular day, grilled cheese sandwiches were on the menu, and the children were in charge of every aspect of preparation. Slices of bread were spread out onto the table and bowls full of butter and knives were on display as an invitation for the children to join in. A handful of children sat buttering bread, a few others flipped the bread onto the skillet, while other children took turns, one-by-one, cutting the sandwiches into fourths. I had witnessed a similar scenario only a day or two before: children cutting with knives, accompanied by a nervous teacher beside them. However, today, the atmosphere did not feel as tense. Granted, these were different teachers, as the teachers rotate spaces each day, and they also had a bit more experience under their belts, as we were now a bit further into the workshop. Still, the teacher at the knife table held herself remarkably well. Likewise, the children with her seemed to display a certain level of comfort with the knife, almost as if their confidence was contagious (see Figure 4-37). Curious to see if she was just holding it together for the children or if she really was at peace in the situation, I asked her how it was going. "Oh yeah… I'm so chill," Sloane (in-service teacher) told me. "It's more the adults that are stressing me out." We laughed, and she continued, "I'm just like, back up – they've got this" (Sloane). "Yeah, she's like the opposite of me," another participant, holding a spatula, told me. "I'm not letting them anywhere near this knife" (Clara, pre-service teacher). She went on to explain how much anxiety she felt while working in this kind of space with the children, and how she applauded her co-teachers for jumping in without reservation. "When everything started happening," she started, "I started sweating profusely and had like a mild anxiety attack" (Clara). I watched her, carefully, as she guided the children to flip the sandwiches over the hot skillet, guiding them to keep their other hand behind their back as they leaned in (see Figure 4-38). The experience seemed to be pushing her in ways that she was not yet comfortable with. "I'm way out of my comfort zone here" she told me. "I

just need to like go make some moon sand," (a sensory activity of mixing flour and baby oil), she told me. "That is *way* more in my element" (Clara).

I asked the teacher who seemed to be so comfortable in this space how she was processing everything. She explained how fascinating she found the whole process and how differently each child would approach the task. "It's so interesting how some kids come at it like a saw (pretends to hack it), and others just like come over here and chop it" Sloane explained. I asked if she was giving any kind of guidance to the children, or just seeing how they would approach the knife on their own. She mentioned a little of both. "So, I'm showing them how this part is super sharp, and they need to be careful when they hold it," she cautioned. "And I kind of show them what to do and then just let them go" (Sloane). Cooking, unlike the other areas of the workshop seemed to work in a more orderly fashion. Whereas in other spaces, the children were free to create on their own, the cooking area seemed to have a clear objective. As the teachers interacted with the children, they instructed them to follow the steps on the wall: 1) Wash your hands, 2) Put butter on bread, 3) Put bread on hot plate, 4) Put cheese on bread, 5) Put another bread on top of the cheese, 6) Cut into four pieces. There seemed to be a lack of freedom, or even variations in the recipes themselves. Rather, learning felt more prescriptive. It was unclear as to whether this prescriptiveness came from the teachers themselves, or in the parameters of this particular space. Either way, it just felt different – separate, almost, from the rest of the workshop. Again, as Jackson and Mazzei (2012) remind me, I cannot help but bring my own experiences into this space – especially the experience I gained in this very workshop many years ago. I struggled then, in some ways, with the structuredness of this area, just as I struggle now. I revisit these biases nine summers later, now seeking to understand the views of the teachers around me, and try earnestly to hear *their* voice, rather than *mine.*

Figure 4-37. *Confidence With Knife*

Figure 4-38. *Caution With Skillet*

I ended the day outside, watching the interactions in the woodworking space. Intrigued by a teacher (rather than a child) diligently at work, I stepped over to see what was happening (see Figure 4-39). This particular child had started on a woodworking project and had become fatigued in the process of hammering and nailing. Frustrated, she enlisted the help of a nearby teacher. They became a team, taking turns as one would tire out. I watched the interchange for a few minutes. The child would take a few smacks with the hammer, “I’m tired. You take a turn”

she would say as she handed her hammer to the teacher. The teacher would work for a few minutes and encourage the child again. A few smacks later, and the hammer was back in the hands of the teacher. It was clear who was doing more of the physical work, but what was unclear was the thought process of the child. I asked the participant if they were building something particular or if the child had expressed any kind of plan. She said that it seemed that it was more about the *process,* and less about the final *product,* from what she was able to observe in her time in the woodworking space. "It's funny because they don't really seem to have a plan in mind. They just want to cut; they just want to hammer," she told me. "I asked [the child] what she was making, and she was like, 'I'm sawing the wood'" she continued. "I asked her again what she was *making*, and she said, 'I'm *sawing* the wood'" Lila (in-service teacher) laughed. Another participant joined our conversation and said that she had observed similar things. "About fifty percent [of the children] say they are building houses," she explained. "The others just want to play with the tools" (Lauren, pre-service teacher). She went on to explain how her reservations about letting the children play with risk have started to dissipate. "I'm feeling good about it," she started. "I was nervous about it at first... It just happens" (Lauren). She was talking about injuries. "A few kids have, like, nicked their fingers," she explained. "But they just take a minute to process and then jump back in" (Lauren). Another participant, Lila, shared the same sentiment. "One kid was like 'ow, I hit my finger' then kept going. Hit it again and was like 'ow, I hit my finger' and just kept going" she laughed. "It's funny because this is like all the stuff my parents told me not to do [as a child], and now I'm like 'go for it. You've got this kid!'" (Lila). Only a few days into the workshop, and I was starting to feel a sense of confidence from the teachers. Confidence not only in themselves, but *in the children*, and what they could do if given the chance.

Figure 4-39. *Teacher and Child Working Together*

June 16, 2022

It was the last day of the first week with the children, and the teachers were in their element. The initial flutters of nervousness were still lingering, but the teachers were comfortable in their spaces. It was evident, by this point in the week, that the children had become more comfortable, as well. They ran into their homerooms, eager to play, and equally excited to see their friends and teachers. My morning started out in the constructive place space, as most of my mornings did. My own children, who were participating in the workshop, would drag me there each day, eager to see the materials they could work with. On this particular morning, my four-year-old daughter had found a roly-poly on our way into the building. She ran to the room, announcing her treasure, and was immediately embraced by a dozen or more children and a small handful of teachers. The roly-poly, well loved, was gripped in her hands. But he was a sneaky little fellow, who kept making his way out of her grip. She needed to create a space for him – a "habitat" Willa called it. She scoured the room, looking for inspiration, and enlisted the

help of a nearby teacher. Together they crafted a humble home – a box, supported by tape, with a window for fresh air. Inside, a carefully laid piece of felt (for comfort), a scarf (for warmth), a small bottle cap full of water, and a collection of leaves that they had gathered from outside. Inside this modest home, all of roly-poly's basic needs would be met. Elated, Willa shuffled her habitat down the hallway for everyone to see.

Lilly, later, told me the conversation that emerged as the two of them worked together. "I'm sitting there with your daughter and she's telling me all about this roly-poly, and asking me all kinds of questions," she told me. "And I'm like, somebody get the [standards]. We should be writing this down!" (Lilly, in-service teacher). What she is referencing is the process of documentation, a common practice in play-based classrooms. Teachers, who embrace play, allow the children to work freely. As the children play, the teacher observes and takes anecdotal notes of what the child is doing and/or saying, as well as any artifacts the child may produce. Documentation, as mentioned in the teacher preparation week, is a learned skillset, and one that is highly regarded at the summer workshop. The teachers are asked to document the children's play, and identify the learning standards that are being met. This process helps them understand the children's construction of knowledge, the value of play in the classroom, and also helps them to communicate growth and understanding to the parents of the children involved. This habitat (see Figure 4-40) would serve as an artifact in documentation. Willa's words would be captured, and her development would be connected to applicable learning standards.

Figure 4-40. *A Habitat for Roly Poly*

As the roly-poly adventure started to come to a close, I took note of a group of boys working diligently together on a sizeable box. The box, larger than any of them, had three square holes in the middle of it. “How did you decide on that shape?” their teacher asked (Lilly, in-service teacher). “That’s the perfect shape we can fit in,” one of the boys told her. She quickly realized that her perspective was off, and so did I. I had thought the square holes were windows for their building, however, the box, currently upright, would need to be laid flat in order for the boys to get inside. “Does it stand up like this? Or lay flat?” Lilly asked the children. They took the box from her and laid it on the ground. One by one, they stepped inside to show her how it worked. They had made a *Lamborghini* – a fancy, Italian sports car (see Figure 4-41). There was only one problem. It didn’t have a steering wheel. The teacher began to engage them in conversation about what they could use for a steering wheel. They decided on a nearby red bowl. One boy suggested they only needed the outside part, so they went on the hunt to find a way to cut out the bottom of the bowl.

Figure 4-41. *The Lamborghini*

I stepped out into the hallway to check on some other classrooms, and told them that I would come back see their final product. When I returned a bit later, I walked into a different scenario. The fancy sports car that the boys had worked so hard to create was now in jeopardy. Another child had crawled in, and refused to leave. Worse, he threatened to tear it apart. I watched as the boys tried to talk him out of it. "No, stop! Stop kicking it. He's going to break it!" they screamed in a panic. Meanwhile, the teacher watched from a distance. The pleas continued for a few more minutes, but the child refused to leave. His kicks became stronger and the other boys grew more concerned for the wellbeing of their Lamborghini. Looking to their teacher for help, they tried desperately to save it (see Figure 4-42). Realizing that the children may not be able to problem-solve on their own, the participant stepped in. "Do you hear your friends asking you to stop? So if your friends are asking you to stop, what can we do?" Lilly (in-service teacher) questioned the child. He did not respond, so she continued. "Do you want to play with your friends? Or there's lots of cool boxes that you can go play in if you'd like" she offered, stooped low and on his level, and rubbing his back while trying to coax him out of the box

(Lilly). “Would you like your own box?” she asked. “Let’s go get a box for ____. Look, there’s a big pile of boxes. C’mon” she called as she reached out to hold his hand and help him out of the box (Lilly). When he hesitated, she turned it into a song, “Let’s get a box for ____.” When that didn’t work, she helped him to stand and enticed him with play; she took him by the hand - “Let’s take a big, dinosaur step” Lilly said, as she roared ferociously. As they walked over, he took interest in another box. The Lamborghini boys continued working, and the room was at peace again.

Figure 4-42. *Lamborghini in Jeopardy*

These organic social situations come up frequently in play. As children are given freedom to work alongside one other, conflict, sometimes, arises. As best as she could, the teacher provided wait time. She sat on her hands to allow the children to work it out on their own. When that did not work, she stepped in and offered a bit of support. She helped to verbally map the situation, rather than jumping in with judgment or punitive consequences. She also provided the boy with an alternative. While it took him some time, he came around, and her persistence with him paid off. The end result left all of the children content. Everyone’s work was protected;

everyone's voice was heard. Again, we see a thread of socio-emotional development at work in play – this natural ebb and flow of relationship building, cooperation, problem-solving, and even conflict, at times. These aspects of development, which may not organically arise in a curricular-based model, lend themselves, easily, to play.

I felt that I could use some fresh air and worked my way into the outdoor learning space. As I walked out into the soul crushing heat of summer, I heard squeals of excitement (whether from fear or happiness, I did not know). So, I followed them. I found a group of children elbow deep in dirt and a pile of worms under the close inspection of microscopes. The worms had been brought by one of the teachers. When teachers are assigned to their area for the day, they are asked to bring an open-ended material to extend the children's play. Teachers worked together to brainstorm these materials with their teams during the teacher preparation week. The worms, purchased at a local sporting goods store, were added to the outdoor sensory bin (see Figure 4-43). The bin was filled with dirt and soil, and the children were given water to add to the sensory experience. The children, obviously enamored by these slimy creatures, had no reservations about jumping in and, quite literally, getting their hands dirty. The teachers, on the other hand, had their own reservations – not with *what* the children were playing with, but *how.* Concerns began to grow for the wellbeing of the worms in the bin. "I'm not sure what to say" Julie told me. "I feel so bad for [the worms]…I mean, I know they don't have brains, but still, I'm like… I think that hurts them" (Julie, in-service teacher). "It hurts me!" another participant responded. "Shouldn't we be teaching empathy?" (Reyna, in-service teacher). The conversation continued to evolve, and soon I was not sure where my own beliefs on this issue were. One teacher described the children pulling the worms apart, while another was drowning them in water (saying that they liked to swim). They both seemed unsure of when and how to step in appropriately and if

they were, perhaps, missing teachable moments, by allowing the children to lead themselves. "Yeah, sometimes I want to step in and stop them," Reyna told me. "I know they're learning, but where's the line?" she wondered. This was not the first time I had encountered a "where is the line?" conversation. In fact, it was probably one of the most common and recurring conversations I would have while at the workshop. In the days prior, I had had numerous conversations with teachers who worried about boundaries while children played with real tools in woodworking, practiced practical, but risky, skills the cooking room with hot skillets and knives, and even teachers who were unsure of when and how to step into conflict between the children. It was a common concern, and was growing into a common theme. I wondered if navigating boundaries would become any easier for the teachers as time went on.

Figure 4-43. *Worm Dilemma*

I ended the day in the storytelling room staffed by two pre-service teachers. They had two other team members, in-service teachers, who were not in the room at the time. I had observed the storytelling room before, and had taken note of the engagement between the teachers and children, the beautiful intertwinement between story and play. However, on this particular day, the room was quiet. It seemed that the children wandered aimlessly. Some looked at books on the

floor, a few colored pictures, and the rest stood around, unsure, really, of what to do. It seemed that the pre-service teachers were also unsure. An in-service teacher walked in from the hallway, explaining that a child had written and illustrated a story with him in the art room. The child had come to act the story out. A professor stood by, seeing how the pre-service teachers would engage. Nothing happened. The professor asked the child, "would you like to act out your story?" The child nodded. "Okay, he needs actors – ask how many" the professor prompted the participant (E. Smith, personal communication, June 16, 2022). The child, needing more actors than there were children in the room at the time, ran out into the hallway to look for friends to be in his story. The pre-service teacher stood there, fingers awkwardly interlaced, unsure of what to do (Kara). The professor coached her, "He went into the hallway to look for friends... Go! Follow him!" (E. Smith, personal communication, June 16, 2022). The participant walked out in search of the boy. The professor looked at me and smiled, as she shooed her out the door. A few minutes later, the participant and child arrived with a host of willing actors. They sat on the circle, and the teacher, still, seemed unsure of what to do next.

The professor stepped in to offer support. "You have to have them spread out," she said, as she waved her arms in an outward motion. "And this will be the stage" she directed (E. Smith, personal communication, June 16, 2022). The professor waited for the participant to take the lead, and when she did not, the professor stepped in again to model the process (see figure 4-44). The professor read the story enthusiastically, encouraged the children when they were unsure of how to play their part, and even became a character in the story herself. As she rolled on the floor, committed to her role, she encouraged the pre-service teacher to take over the story. The participant did, and soon became a character herself. Giggles erupted at the sight of two grownups under the thumb of a child's direction.

As the story went on, Kara became more comfortable and even enthusiastic about the process. She then invited another child to tell a story and, while still unsure of herself, she seemed a bit more confident in the process. This time, the professor stepped back, and allowed her to work independently. While not a perfect attempt, Kara made *progress,* which would hopefully continue to develop over time. There is tremendous importance in support and supervision in a practicum experience. While experience, itself, offers its own kind of value, we must keep in mind that there are different kinds of experiences, both good and bad. In these moments when new teachers struggle, it is imperative that a mentor be close by to offer support. The outcome, here, is evidence of that. I had spoken to this professor the day before about how important these kinds of experiences were. She compared teaching to driving a car. "You can watch videos all you want about driving a car," she told me. "You can read books, you can take the test, but until you actually get behind the wheel, you can't understand how to drive; it is the same with teaching" she explained (E. Smith, personal communication, June 15, 2022).

Figure 4-44. *Mentorship in Storytelling*

June 17, 2022

After the first week of working with the children directly, the teachers came together for a day of reflection and planning. They began by revisiting the foundations of early childhood education that they had crafted during the initial intensive week of professional development. As they came together with their small groups to reflect on the previous week, the professor asked them to consider how their perspectives might be changing. Did they still hold true to the foundations they established, or did working with the children have an impact on their thinking? After a few minutes, they began to share out their experiences.

There seemed to be a common thread between the teachers regarding expectations versus reality. One in-service teacher, Sloane, shared the shift she saw in her own children's experiences. She described the first day of the workshop, and how, even given complete freedom, the children stayed close to her, rather than exploring other areas of the workshop. This came as a surprise to her; and though the children, by the end of the week, had gained the confidence to roam about, the initial closeness was surprising to her. She wondered if it had anything to do with the assumptions children come to school with – that the teachers were in charge, and the children should follow their lead. This workshop, being so contrary to a teacher-directive model, would be confusing, she thought, for a young child who had not experienced taking the lead. She described how conventional the children played at first, and how, by the end of the week, they were so engaged in open-ended play. She described elaborate projects that started in Boxville, and worked their way into the outside play space (Sloane). Her perspective seemed to strike a chord with another in-service teacher, who felt that his own ideas of children's learning were beginning to shift. "I feel like my brain is preconditioned to meet certain outcomes [as a teacher]," he told us. "Now I see [the children] as a seed. I don't have to be the sun, water,

and weather. Now I just see their individual growth. I no longer see them as a *statistic*, but as a person," he continued. "You just have to readjust your microscope a little bit" (Arlo, in-service teacher). His insight drew the attention of a professor who encouraged the teachers to create change in the way young children perceive school – "some of the things that we're doing," she explained, "we're helping those ideas to become undone" (T. Callahan, personal communication, June 17, 2022). She was referring to the idea of teacher-led versus child-led learning. "We all come into the classroom with expectations of what our role is," she continued. "We have to live in the moment and learn to be flexible" (T. Callahan, personal communication, June 17, 2022). Another professor joined in the discussion, asking the teachers to be "intentional…to establish an ethic of resistance to taken for granted assumptions" (P. Egret, personal communication, June 17, 2022). He was referencing the work of Hillevi Lenz Taguchi (2010), asking teachers to challenge ideas and biases that impact their approach in the classroom, understanding that ideas which go *unchallenged* create inequitable outcomes for children everywhere.

Participants began to share out about their own assumptions and how those ideas of *what it means to be a teacher* have impacted their own approach to the classroom. One in-service teacher shared of her struggle to allow the children to lead, rather than being direct in her approach. "[I] had to relinquish control and take a step back," she explained. "I had to stop myself from saying anything and let it be" (Reyna). She spoke of her constant evaluation of herself; when she wanted to step in, she would ask herself *why?* Many teachers nodded in agreement, as if they had experienced the same inner struggle. A professor joined the conversation, applauding the teachers for stepping out of their comfort zone. "It takes a lot of courage to step back and ask yourself 'why?'" she explained. "It takes a lot of reflection to understand your own thought process as a teacher" (E. Smith, personal communication, June 17,

2022). Another professor agreed, “the process of learning and *relearning* takes courage” (T. Callahan, personal communication, June 17, 2022), she suggested. There is an element of vulnerability to admit that we do not have all the answers. The teachers were invited to relinquish some of their control, and to jump into the children’s play. By doing so, “we are saying to them ‘I want to learn from you, too’” (E. Smith, personal communication, June 17, 2022). There is power, perhaps, in this shift of control. Children, empowered, gain a sense of autonomy over their own learning. Rather than being *required* to learn, they are *driven* to learn. The relinquishing of this teacher control takes constant self-reflection and evaluation, as it is contrary to our natural dispositions as teachers. How can we unlearn this? The teachers, challenged, went into the next week with a fresh set of eyes and a new perspective.

June 27, 2022

As the weeks went on, the teachers continued working with the children. They grew together, and learned from each other. As comfortability in the learning environment increased, for teachers and children, alike, transformations began to take place. Entering the final week of the summer workshop, marvelous things were at work. As I entered the building, I was taken aback by the craftsmanship on display, or, possibly, *in the works* – I couldn’t tell. Vivid paintings filled the halls with life; nestled neatly beneath, creative construction projects waiting patiently to be taken home by their artists (see figure 4-45). Children ran and walked and skipped, and even bear crawled, from one room to the next, giggling with their friends. Spanish and English, and a beautiful mixture of the two, were echoing through the halls. It was wonderfully crafted chaos. Everyone, it seemed, was in their element.

As I stepped closer to the workmanship on the floor, I was drawn to a number of tables of all shapes and sizes (see figure 4-46).

Figure 4-45. *Children's Art*

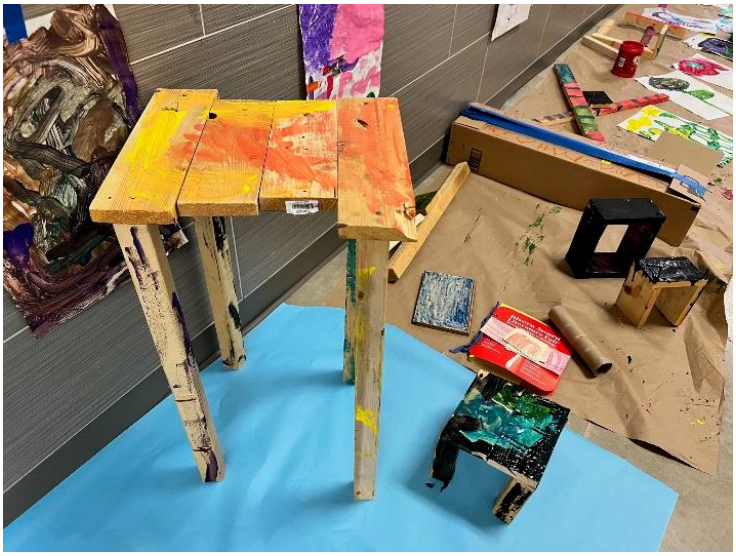

Figure 4-46. *Tables on Display*

These were not tables made from cardboard and glue, *not that that would be of any less value*; rather, these were tables crafted from wood. They were rugged, sturdy, level, sawed apart and nailed back together in the heat of the summer sun. This was painstaking work, not something lightly done. The persistence, the determination, the diligence that this would require could not possibly be the work of a small child, I thought to myself. I paused for a moment and wondered how much, if any, of the workload had been shared by a teacher. Was there oversight, guidance,

even a helping hand, at times? My curiosity drew me outside to the woodworking area, where I could see for myself.

My bias toward play left me in absolute *awe.* As I walked into the humid summer air, I noticed a handful of children, heads down, deep in the work. I tried to talk to them about their various projects, but they had little time to chat. Instead, they pointed to other things they had built days prior, explaining how they have "updated" their models. I looked in the field and saw a small collection of tables and chair, prototypes, I assumed (see Figure 4-47). I looked at the teachers in amazement, and they looked at me with the same sentiment. It was certainly something to behold. The children, diligently at work, would choose a piece of wood, hold it up to their creation, measure it, mark it, cut it, and bring it back to the assembly line (see Figure 4-48). One professor, in an effort to the make the process more manageable, was predrilling holes for the children to insert their nails. Teachers offered support, as needed, but for the most part were taking in the learning process that was unfolding. Two participants, Megan (in-service teacher) and Rachel (pre-service teacher), were hesitant to jump in, after having had some rough encounters at the other end of the hammer. One in-service teacher, in particular, was sold instantly. "It's wobbly," a child said as he came running up to his teacher. "It *is* wobbly," Arlo confirmed, "good observation." Curious about his perspective on the woodworking process, I engaged the participant in conversation. He explained that he felt that there were aspects of woodworking that could realistically work in his classroom. Pre-cut boards, hammers, and nails, he felt, he could sell to his administration. Saws, on the other hand, would likely not work. "I'm just not comfortable enough with it yet," he told me. "Like me with 22 kids… it's a lot. I'd have to really make a case for it. But I think a good Segway is like starting with the hammers… it's scaffolding for them, *and* me," he explained. "Like even getting tiny nails and popsicle sticks

and having them nail those together – that would be so easy to do" (Arlo). When I asked how he might make a case for it to his administration, he explained the mathematical concepts at work – "it's an application of measuring stuff in different units, like in centimeters, inches, and yards," he suggested. "I feel like that's a way I could sneak it in" (Arlo). I was intrigued by this idea of having to *sneak in* this kind of play, and why the teachers felt that in order to allow their children to play, they must first *make a case* for it. Was it that administration was really that steeped in tradition, or did the teachers only believe so? Either way, would they be willing to fight for it, not as a byproduct of learning, but as child-centered curriculum in and of itself?

Figure 4-47. *Chair in the Woodworking Space*

Figure 4-48. *Child Builds Table With Teacher Support*

It was almost time for morning snack, so I made my way down to the cooking room to see what was in the works. I walked in, greeted by children, who were happily blasting pretzels into tiny pieces on the table. They were elbow deep in sun butter and a number of dry ingredients (see Figure 4-49). Granola balls were on the menu. As the children worked, I approached the teachers, each offering their own perspective on their experiences in the cooking room. Granted, today's menu item was one of minimal risk, unlike other recipes that called for sharp knives and hot skillets, the teachers all seemed to be at ease. In the earliest days of the summer workshop, I had entered this room and was immediately overtaken by a sense of caution. Teachers hovered over the children, offering step-by-step instruction, and even, at times, hand-over-hand guidance. Today, this was not the case. The teachers hung back and let the children take the lead, as much as possible.

One thing, mentioned previously, that has always struck me about the cooking area was the seeming lack of freedom in the children's experience. One participant, Lila (in-service teacher), shared a similar sentiment. "[it] feels like one of the more teacher-led rooms," she explained. "Even if we put the recipe on the board, they can't read yet, so we still have to guide them one step at a time" (Lila). Another participant offered her perspective. "It's good though, because they still get to practice that choice-making. And…they don't normally get to play with cooking utensils in unconventional ways," she suggested. "They also get to try new foods or even try [foods] in new ways" (Lauren, pre-service teacher). In the midst of our conversation, an equally eager and sticky child ran up and asked, "what do we do next?!" We all laughed, and the teachers went back to work. I watched them as they interacted with the children. I did notice the choice-making that the teachers had described, even in such a scripted environment. As one participant modeled how she rolled the granola mix into balls, she explained that her method was

not the only way. “I like to form it into little balls, but it’s up to you,” she told the children. “It’s your choice how you want to make it” (Gabriela, in-service teacher). Another participant engaged the children in conversation as they worked. “____ how does it feel when you mix it? Does it feel good? It is hard to mix or easy to mix?” Lila asked - to which the child responded, “It smells *so good.* People should live in here!” That quote, along with other pictures and artifacts would be collected by the teachers to use in their documentation work.

Figure 4-49. *Granola Balls*

This authentic way of engaging children where they are has seemed to have impacted the teachers in different ways. Some participants come from more teacher-directive backgrounds, others have experience in play-theory, and still others have no experience at all. Lauren, a pre-service teacher, is experiencing this all for the first time. She has never before worked with children in any capacity. Her fresh perspective is positive toward play. In fact, her only reservation seemed to be toward her prospective future placements. “It’s so fun because this is my first time working with kids, and so I’ve never known any different” she told me. “I don’t think I’m going to like student teaching. It’ll probably be way more structured” (Lauren). This conversation made me wonder about the placing of this practicum in the teachers’ course of

study. When is this experience most valuable? In the undergraduate years, when perceptions are still forming? Or in graduate years, when teachers are capable of studying the power of play on a more advanced level and with years of experience already under their belt? Perhaps it had more to do with personalities and temperaments – only time would tell.

June 28, 2022

Week after week, I have found myself continually intrigued by the boundaries the children enforce on themselves. Even in the last week of the summer workshop, there are children who do not yet realize that they can move freely from one room to another. They either do not *know* that it is possible, or do not *feel* like it is possible to wander into the hallways and follow their own interests. While most children do bounce in and out of the different classrooms and their offerings, there are still some who stay in the same room day in and day out. Whether they are driven by familiarity, comfortability, security, convenience, or fear, I do not know. What I do know is that they *have* the freedom to move and learn how they choose, and still, they *choose* to stay. What compels a child to stay within the confines of four walls? More importantly, what compels them to step out?

On this particular day, I would be confronted with this scenario once again. Only this time, I am not the only one noticing the child's reservations. As I walked into the block room, I was drawn to a little girl, playing alongside her teachers. There were not many other children in the room, and no other girls. On the other side of the room, a small band of rambunctious boys built something spectacular together. Another boy, intrigued, bumbled over and knocked it down. His countenance led us to believe that it was intentional, though no one really ever knows for sure. "No!" the band of boys shouted. "He's knocking down our tower." Immediately, a participant was on the scene. Rather than address the boy directly, he turned to the boys who had

been wronged. “I see that ____ is just wanting to destroy things right now, so let’s move your building over here…to keep it safe,” Arlo, an in-service teacher, precautioned. He turned to the offender. “____ do you see how your friends moved away because they didn’t like that? Do you want to play with your friends?” he asked the child. “Do they like when you knock their tower down?” (Arlo). The boy looked out of the corner of his eye, but did not speak. Instead he decided to step into another room to play. Again, my attention was drawn to the little girl who could not make such a bold move.

The little girl, playing alone, took interest in a cash register (see Figure 4-50). Her teachers, intrigued, engaged her in play. “What can you buy with $1?” Megan (in-service teacher), asked. The girl put her finger to her chin and thought. Before she could respond, another teacher jumped into the scene. Making the situation almost awkward, she took the register from the girl, and ran into the hallway. The child, giggling wildly, ran after her, but hit the brakes at the door. I got the impression that the teachers were up to something – that maybe they were trying to coax this little girl out of her comfort zone. They all watched as the girl peeked down the hallway, stretching her neck as far as it could possibly go - looking left, and right, and left again. Her teacher was out of sight, and more importantly, so was her cash register.

Figure 4-50. *Child Plays With Teachers*

As she waited for her teacher to return with her cash register, she took interest in a little boy who was marching around with a "drum." The drum was nothing more than a few pieces of natural wood, each making a distinctly beautiful sound, depending on its shape and size. He had discovered this alongside his teacher as the cash register drama unfolded. The two of them had experimented with almost every combination of "drum" and "drumstick" until the boy had found what he had been looking for (see Figure 4-51). "I'm going to tell my parents this school is very fun" he told his teacher. He paused momentarily between the words, almost as if he was code switching between his home language and English. Just then, the teacher ran back in with the cash register, waving her cash in the air. "I have $502 dollars!" Rachel said (pre-service teacher). "Do you want to pay us?" her co-teacher asked. "We're a band" (Arlo, in-service teacher). "Sure," she said. "Let me see what you've got" (Rachel). The band performed a synchronized drum circle, and soon the boy was singing a popular song into a Styrofoam cup microphone.

Figure 4-51. *Drum Circle*

Applause ensued, and the teacher went to pay the band. Unexpectedly, the little girl ran between them and stole the money. She roared, "I got her *money*!" As she danced around the

room, another participant ran up and stole the money away from her. “Now *I* got your money” he laughed, almost pirate-like, as he ran out the door (Arlo). He looked back to see if the child would follow. She did not. He came back into the room and once again the child stole the money. “Hey, she took my money. I’m just a little old lady” he said, as he transitioned into his new character (Arlo). The child laughed, but only for a moment, as she was soon confronted by another thief. Trying again to compel the child to chase them into the hallway, Rachel grabbed the cash and ran. The child ran to the door as fast as she could, and stopped. This time, the teachers engaged her directly. “Go get her!” one participant prompted urgently (Arlo). “I can’t” the little girl said. “Why not?” Arlo asked. “There are no rules here. Go get her!” he urged. She peeked out the door, looking for any sign of the thief or her beloved treasure. Her teacher offered some support. “I’ll stand here with you. See? It’s safe” he affirmed. (Arlo). The child almost looked as if she was going to venture out, but again hesitated. She waited by the door, knowing the thief would return.

Several minutes later, the thief *did* return, only this time with a handful of children hot on her trail. Over time, I have come to discover that children generally love to chase, whether or not they understand who is being chased or why. These children had witnessed a thief on the loose, and had either followed her to enact justice, or followed her just because it looked like a great deal of fun. Either way, the game was catching, literally and figuratively. As the children circled the room, the teacher made a break for the hallway. They trailed behind her, one-by-one – only this time, a new friend had joined the chase. The little girl, supported by friends, followed after the thief. Squeals of excitement arose as they ran into the hallway in pursuit of their precious treasure. The teachers, pleased to see her join in, looked at each other and smiled. Perhaps it was the persistence of her teachers, or the continuous support they offered her as she wavered by the

door. Or perhaps it was, as Vygotsky (1978) believed, the mentorship of more experienced peers that coaxed her out of her comfort zone. Would she integrate into other classrooms tomorrow, I wondered? Or would she continue to linger by the door? Only time would tell. Today, it seemed, she had conquered her fear, and we were all okay with that.

What causes a child to leave a space, and what causes them to linger? Again, I was confronted with this thought. As I entered the science inquiry space, I was drawn to a sensory bin full of seemingly unrelated items. Beads, macaroni, rice, pieces of straws and pipe cleaners, and shiny cupcake filters filled the tub. Inside the bin were a number of little hands, each working diligently, alongside each other, but not necessarily *with* each other (see Figure 4-52). This type of parallel play is not uncommon in a sensory table. Generally, children find items of their own interest and work independently, shoulder to shoulder – enjoying the company, but not dependent upon it. It commonly happens that multiple children will be interested at the same time, and while the children are not necessarily playing together, they enjoy each other's companionship. On this particular day, there were many children filtering in and out of the science inquiry space. However, there were two who seemed to stick around as others passed through. Their interest in the bin intrigued me, and it seemed to captivate the interest of a nearby teacher, as well. "I'm just intrigued by what intrigues them" she told me. "I would have never thought to mix all these different things together. They're just learning so much" (Ashley, in-service teacher).

She went on to explain the various ways she had observed the children playing – some sorting and classifying the different objects, one child who had made a bracelet with tiny beads and macaroni pieces and pipe cleaners that he had found in the bin. "It's so interesting what captivates them for so long" she explained. "Some kids will just stop by, others will stay for 15

minutes. They just camp out and pick out all the treasures" (Ashley). She pointed to the bin on the other side of the hallway and explained the engagement the children had shown with the worms, and the things they were learning as they played freely with them (see Figure 4-53). "They built a house and put dirt in it and buried the worms in the dirt," she explained. "So they knew the worms needed the dirt to survive. It's so interesting all the connections [they're making]" (Ashley). She went on to explain that other children connected with the worms in a different way. "Then other kids are just fishing them out and looking at them… They are just little researchers" (Ashley). This idea of children as researchers is nothing new. In fact, it is a common refrain of the teachers who are experiencing the summer workshop. When children are given the freedom to play and inquire about their natural world, they become responsible for their own learning. What then becomes the role of the teacher, I wondered to myself? What can we offer a child that they cannot discover better on their own? Opportunity, perhaps?

Figure 4-52. *Science Sensory Bin*

Figure 4-53. *Worm House*

June 29, 2022

As the weeks went on, the children became increasingly interested in my growing belly. Almost daily, as I walked into the building, I would be greeted by little hands in search of a good baby kick. This day was no different. A familiar friend came up and tried to listen for the baby's heartbeat. As she cupped her ear against my belly I asked what she wanted to do today. She looked at me, shrugged her shoulders, and smiled. I followed her out to the woodworking area, and watched her sift through a pile of wood. As she sorted through the possibilities before her, I noticed a nearby teacher working alongside another child. This particular boy was not new to woodworking, but his teacher, Reyna (in-service teacher), was experiencing it for the first time. What an interesting scenario to watch unfold – when the student becomes the expert and the teacher, the novice. These two were quite a pair. His confidence more than made up for her uncertainty in the area. The bookshelf the boy was making, being quite taller and heavier than he was, needed extra hands to keep it in place as he hammered. She would take a deep breath at each swing; he would smile, whack, and look for her sigh of relief. *She* may not have known, but

he knew he was teaching her. I watched the two as his confidence grew and her early flutters of nervousness dissipated. While not totally comfortable with the situation, she was certainly in awe of his ingenuity. And it was, truly, something spectacular to behold – again, recognizing fully my own biases toward this phenomenon and the lens in which I interpret meaning (see Figure 4-54).

Figure 4-54. *Bookshelf in Woodworking Space*

I asked her if this was ever something she would consider trying with her children in the classroom. She kindly said no, admitting her own reservations, as well as the school's. "I don't know, I just don't think I'm there yet," she told me. "I'm not even sure if my school would allow it or not – maybe some parts of it. But I wouldn't try it with my kindergarteners… maybe like second or third graders" (Reyna). I knew this teacher to be fairly open-minded and was surprised at her hesitancy over this particular area. As with any program, there are limitations – one here being that the way teachers are scheduled means that some get a bit more experience in certain areas over others. This would be her only day in woodworking, so we would not get to see her feelings toward it change, as we may have with some of the other participants.

I have been continually surprised at the variance of craftsmanship in the woodworking area. On one side of the building there were tables and chairs and bookcases in the works, each

cleverly and intentionally designed by a child. These projects took days to accomplish, hours of dedication, precision, creative thinking, and problem-solving. On the other side of the building stood two little boys, hammering nails directly into the woodworking table itself (see Figure 4-55). They were happy, just to sit there and whack, and needed little guidance or attention from a teacher. Between the two groups of children, I noticed a little girl hammering alongside a toddler (see Figure 4-56). They took turns, as she guided him to make a shelf. They passed the hammer back and forth until the nail was out of sight. I laughed, because I could not help but notice the differences in approach. Some children simply come to take a whack and leave, while others commit day after day to make something incredible, and still others came just to be a good friend. This is what is so beautiful about multi-aged play. The children at the woodworking table were doing no less problem-solving and creative thinking than those building bookcases. They just did not have an end goal in mind. They were immersed in the *process*. It is hard to untrain my teacher brain to find value in the *process,* rather than the *product* of learning. It is something I have to continually remind myself. My husband, who participated in the summer workshop alongside our children, could not help but notice it, too. "I have to keep telling myself that the goal is not to make something – just to let it be. It's so different than the way I was taught" he admitted (Cody). Another participant shared a similar sentiment. "It's been a lot of biting my tongue and acting contrary to how I would normally act," Julie (in-service teacher) told me. "I would normally jump in…still learning how to step back" she admitted. One lesson that we seem to be learning together this summer is simply to step back and enjoy the process - untraining ourselves to react, and instead, simply respond to the situation. There is value in simply *being*, is there not?

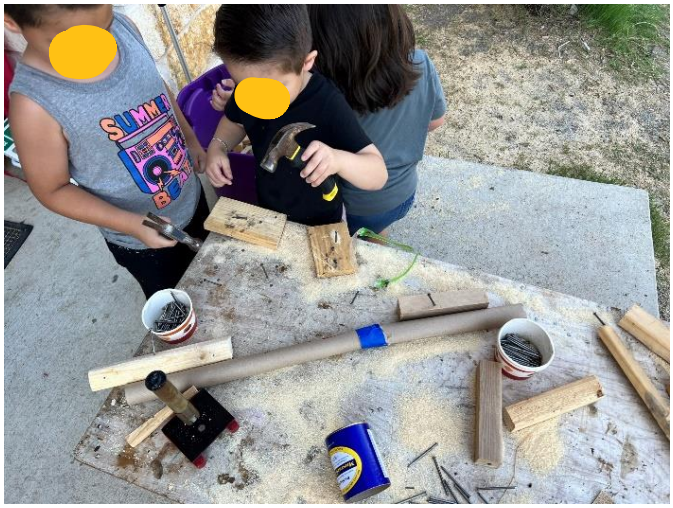

Figure 4-55. *Child Hammering into Table*

Figure 4-56. *Child Helping Peer to Hammer*

Drawn to this idea of *process* work, I found myself in the art room. Things in the art room were always taking shape. This room, always bustling, was the home to more than sixteen painting easels, shelves of paper, tables for drawing, a variety of chalks and crayons and markers and a number of paint brushes and other materials to help bring their creations to life. Projects that started in other areas of the workshop often made their way into the art room. Constructive play creations, Boxville inventions, woodworking masterpieces, and even books from the storytelling room were often given a final polish in paint. This room brought joy to all the

children, and rarely were there tears or conflicts. The hardest part, in fact, of bringing a project to the art room was having to part with it overnight so that it could dry. On this particular day, children were polishing off their handcrafted tables and telling each other stories as they painted at the easels.

There was a mix of English and Spanish, which made it challenging for me to fully understand, but I gathered enough to know that there was a popular bad guy being portrayed with paper and paint. “Huggie Wuggie” one child exclaimed. “About to kill yourself…it’s what it tells kids to do” another chimed in. “I know Huggie Wuggie” a child across the room explained, “he kills. So if someone hugs Huggie Wuggie, he kills.” The artist in question beamed with pride. The teachers, on the other hand, raised their eyebrows with concern as they circled ‘round the alleged portrait (see Figure 4-57). One pre-service teacher, particularly put out, took the painting down and put it on the rack to dry. “I’m just tired of looking at it,” she told me (Clara). Another participant expressed her concern with the obsession the child had with the monster. “Just as a human being, that kind of thing, like violence, just makes me uncomfortable” she explained. (Sloane, in-service teacher). She continued to express her frustration. “I don’t know. It’s interesting that they told me they can’t watch that at home, yet they feel comfortable here to talk about it,” she started. “It’s almost like [the classroom is] a safe space. I just hate that they’re like ‘this is the bad guy and I love him’” (Sloane). If I’m being honest, there are aspects of bad guy play that also make me hesitate as a teacher. These moments remind me how truly hard it is to simply respond, rather than react to a situation. My personal reaction might have been similar to these teachers; luckily for me, this time I am simply standing back and watching the scenario unfold and do not have to engage. I am curious why neither of the teachers took the time to talk to the child about his picture or why he identified with the bad guy so strongly. Might there have

been an element of innocence in his obsession that was overlooked by simply tossing the painting aside? Did we miss a moment with this little one?

Figure 4-57. *Bad Guy Painting*

I am reminded, once again, of the complexities of play – for children and teachers, alike. It is difficult to navigate those boundaries, as so many teachers have told me over the course of these weeks together. Learning through play can be exhausting, one in-service teacher expressed. "It's just a lot. It feels overwhelming at times" she told me. "It's been good. It's pushed me. But I'm also just tired" (Julie). Here we are nearing the end of the workshop, and still, questions continue to arise. Are there elements of play that should be off limits or is everything fair game? Are bad guys banished from the art room? Are swords against the rules in the woodworking space? Is there a place for cardboard guns or stories about murder in the classroom? Are play themes that cause ethical dilemmas something to be avoided or something to be *embraced*? Do we turn our heads or do we engage? I do not have the answers, and the more I seek answers, the more questions I seem to have. Am I, myself, changing as a result of this summer workshop? Perhaps.

June 30, 2022

As the sun rose on the final day of the workshop, I found myself longing for more *time.* Time to get to know the teachers, time to understand their stories, time to watch them engage with the little ones around them, time to watch the children laugh and play and grow and learn, time to just sit and make sense of it all. The days and weeks have all run together. The stories, a blur, and at the same time still so vivid in my mind. I tried frantically to soak up every last ounce of this summer adventure together. As I moved in and out of rooms, empty notebook in hand, feeling pulled in every direction, I realized that I simply could not take it all in. So I sat. Still, and open to whatever conversation might come my way - whatever opportunity might present itself. And up walked Jose, a teacher I had befriended over the course of the summer. Jose, well known for his words of encouragement sat down beside me, and offered this. "The one thing I have learned as a teacher is *time"* he told me. "I teach [the children] that if you give your time to something…or to someone… it will pay off." A little boy ran up, and Jose helped him fasten his transformer costume to his arm (see Figure 4-58). "It is no different with teachers" he continued. "You want us to make a difference? You want us to make change? Don't give us techniques… no strategies… just give us time" (Jose, personal communication, June 30, 2022).

Figure 4-58. *Transformer Creation*

As his words struck my teacher heart, goosebumps creeped up my arms. I knew that he was right. In all our striving after educational success, had we forgotten that true learning takes *time?* It takes time to explore. It takes time to make connections. It takes time to build relationships. It takes time to try something new and fail and try again and again and again. Learning takes time, yet that is the one thing we never have enough of. How can we make more time in our classrooms? Time to just be together and grow together - to listen to each other and to learn from one another - time to play together. Again, I remind myself of my own positionality, and how my experiences of play have shaped my researcher-lens in this space.

As the summer came to an end, and we said our goodbyes, I found myself forever grateful for the opportunity to learn and grow alongside these teachers. Their stories, still so vivid in my mind, I hoped would help me understand how their perspectives changed over the course of our time together. In an effort to make sense of it all, I began to look critically at the survey data and participant interviews. These findings will be discussed in further detail in the pages to come.

Survey Findings

Due to a lack of buy-in from the participants (n = 3) when the survey was administered electronically via Survey Monkey prior to the start of the readings week, a paper survey was administered in person on the first day of class, June 6, 2022. The result of this change caused total participation numbers to grow (n = 27). However, given that the teachers had already completed a reading intensive week, their initial scores surrounding the perceptions of play were likely higher than if I had been able to get a true baseline the week before. Overall, initial composite scores were high (total Pre-Survey = 1,631). While not getting a true baseline on the participants was a noted limitation in the study, it served to uncover some unexpected findings.

After the initial intensive week of teacher preparation work (described in previous pages), the participants were asked to complete the Post 1 survey on June 10, 2022. Some teachers' individual scores increased (n = 7), while others remained the same (n = 3). Interestingly, many teachers' scores dropped after the week of teacher preparation (n = 17). While scores were anticipated to have grown slightly higher, overall, scores declined significantly (p = .007) with a total Post 1 composite sum of 1,553. Finally, at the end of the practicum experience, after three weeks of working directly with the children, teachers were asked to take one final survey (July 1, 2022). While Post 2 scores did not surpass Pre-Survey scores, they did make a slight increase overall (n = 1,557). Results of the paired-samples t-test are reported in Table 4-1.

Table 4-1
Results from Paired Sample t-tests

Measure	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*df*	*p*	95% CI		Cohen's *d*
						LL	*UL*	
Pre-Survey to Post 1	2.89	5.09	2.951	26	.007	.877	4.901	.568
Post 1 to Post 2	-.148	6.98	-.110	26	.913	-2.910	2.614	-.021
Pre-Survey to Post 2	2.74	7.43	1.917	26	.066	-.198	5.68	.369

Note. N = 27. CI = confidence interval; *LL* = lower limit; *UL* = upper limit.

An exploratory analysis was done on the data and each variable was checked for completeness. For Pre-Survey and Post 1, there were no missing values and all data fell within range. There were no outliers or abnormal distributions. For Post 2, scores were missing for one teacher. After multiple failed attempts of reaching the teacher to complete her final survey, a mean score was calculated for each Post 2 item, and used in place of the missing teacher's scores. Apart from that, there were no items that were missing or out of range. However, there was a sudden and unexplainable discrepancy with one teacher's Post 2 scores. After posting

perfect scores on Pre- and Post 1 surveys (66), she made a sudden 22 point drop (44). The score did not seem to accurately reflect what I understood her beliefs to be toward play, based on personal interactions and conversations with the student. Ultimately, it was decided to treat this teacher as an outlier, not in an analytical sense, but due to a misalignment of her survey data and observational data. The teacher was removed entirely from the survey data portion of the research (Pre-Survey, Post 1, and Post 2). After the removal of her scores from all data sets, the scores were as follows: Pre-Survey Composite Score: 1,565; Post 1 Composite Score: 1,487; Post 2 Composite Score: 1,513.

Overall, from Pre-Survey to Post 1 there was a 78 point decrease of statistical significance (p = .007; following intensive teacher preparation week); from Post 1 to Post 2 there was a 26 point increase, though not statistically significant (p = .363; following three week workshop with children); and from Pre-Survey to Post 2 there was a 52 point decrease (p = .128; overall summer practicum). From Pre- to Post 1, seven teachers' scores increased, two teachers' scores remained the same, and 17 teachers' scores decreased. From Post 1 to Post 2, sixteen teachers' scores increased, four teachers' scores stayed the same, and six teachers' scores decreased. When looking at the entire practicum experience (Pre-survey to Post 2), 11 teachers' scores increased overall, three teachers' scores stayed the same, and 12 teachers' scores decreased overall – again, keeping in mind that we did not get a true baseline on the initial Pre-Survey. Below is an exploratory analysis of each data set:

Descriptive Profiles

Pre-Survey

An exploratory analysis was conducted on the Pre-Survey data and no missing values were found. The data (n = 26) had a range of 17 (49 min, 66 max), a mean of 60.19, (95%

Confidence Interval: 58.15 LL – 62.24 UL), Interquartile Range (IQR) of 9, and a standard deviation of 5.06. All responses fell within the range. There were no outliers detected. The distribution was slightly negatively skewed (see Figures 4-59 and 4-60).

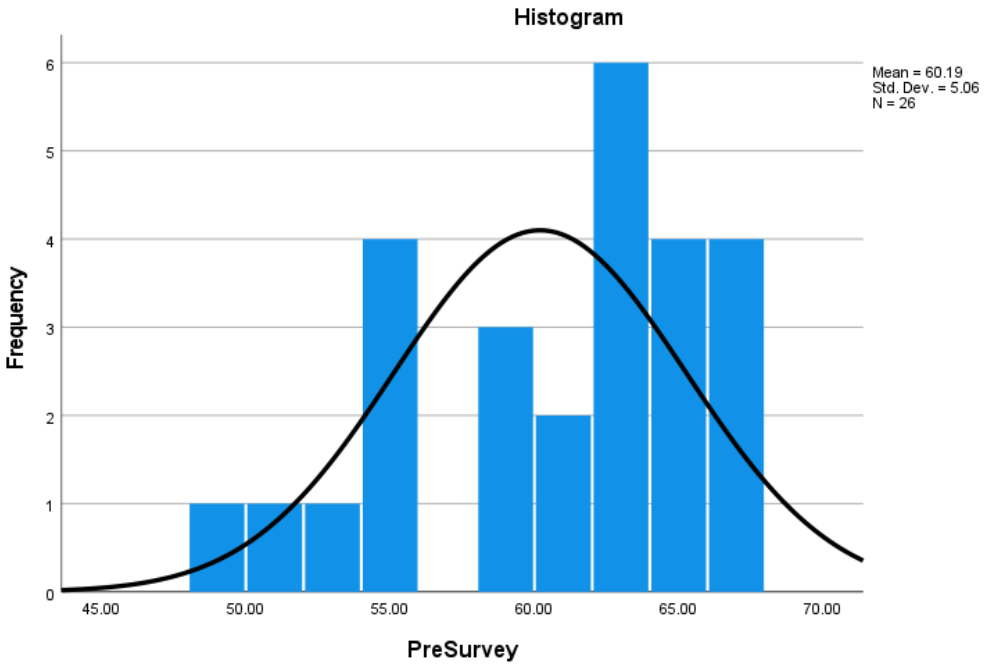

Figure 4-59. *Histogram, Pre-Survey*

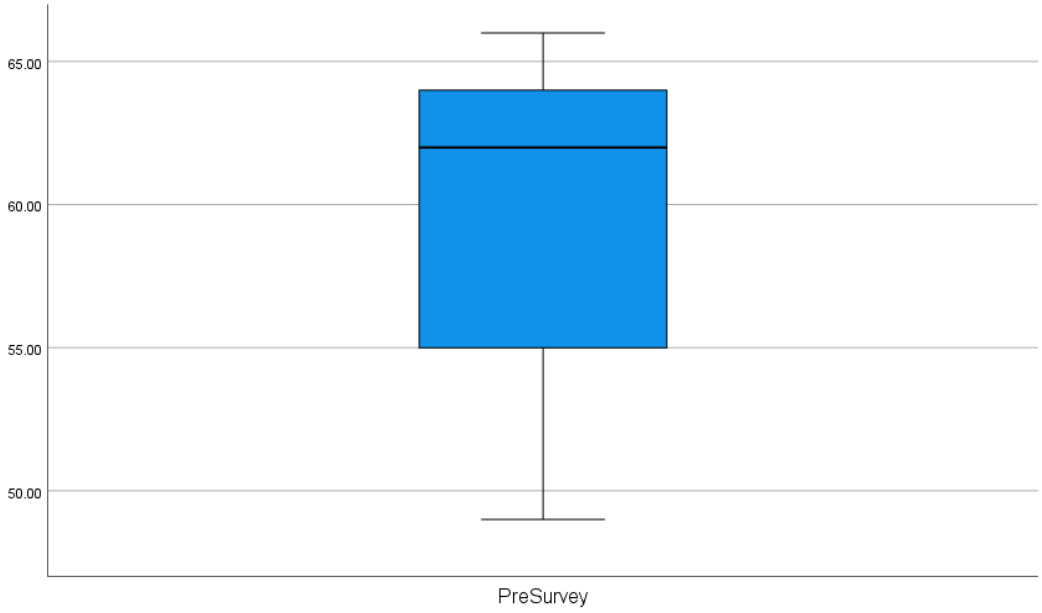

Figure 4-60. *Box and Whisker Plot, Pre-Survey*

Post 1 Survey

An exploratory analysis was conducted on the Post 1 survey data and no missing values were found. The data (n = 26) had a range of 20 (45 min, 65 max), a mean of 57.19, (95% Confidence Interval: 55.07 LL – 59.32 UL), IQR of 8.50, and a standard deviation of 5.26. All responses fell within the range. There were no outliers detected. The distribution was normal (see Figures 4-61 and 4-62).

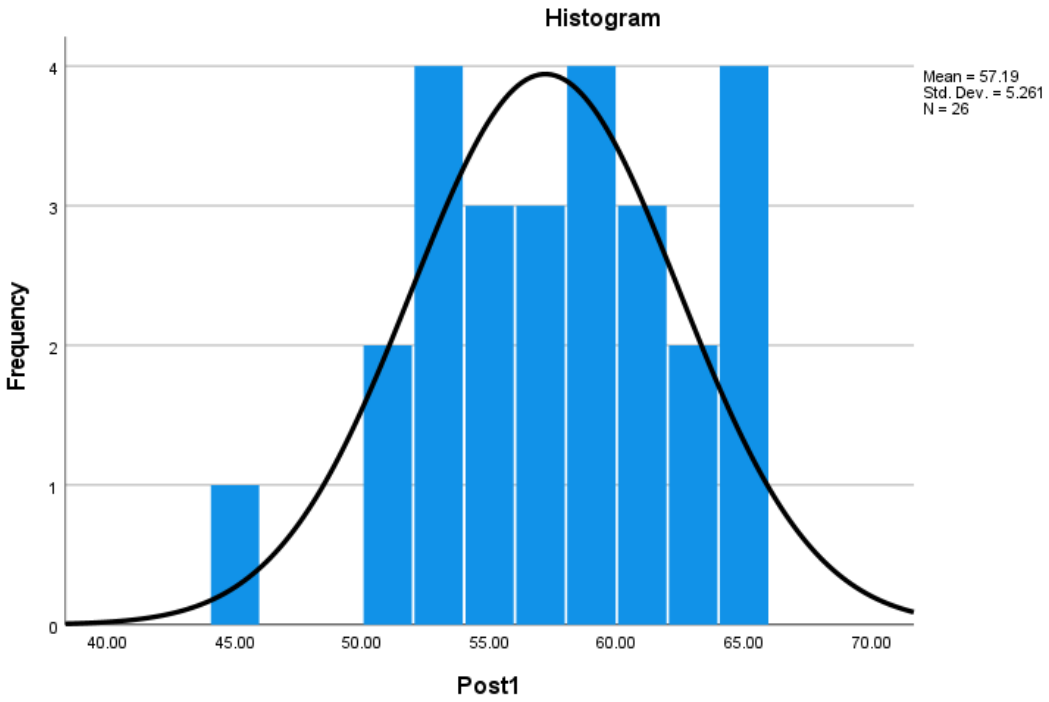

Figure 4-61. *Histogram, Post 1*

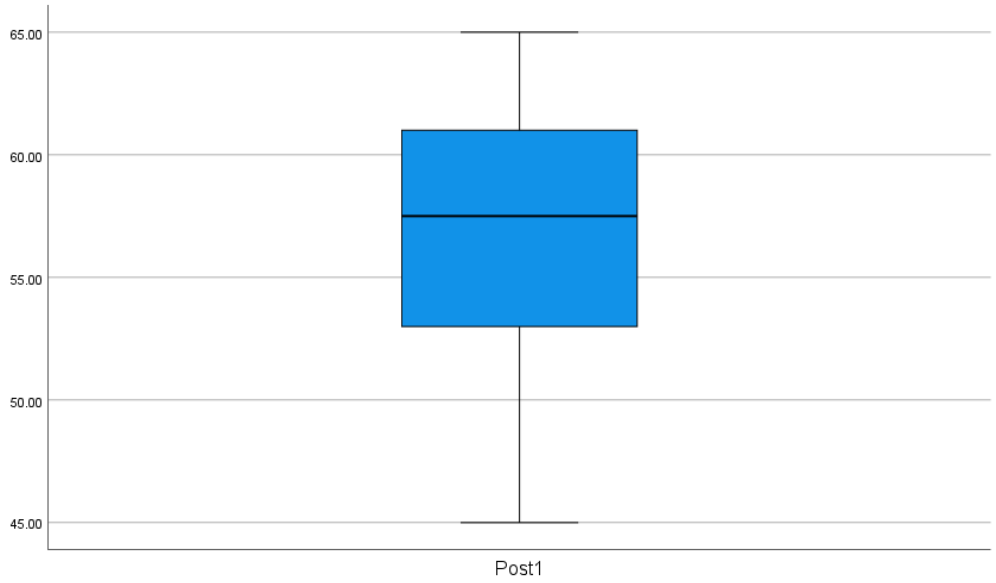

Figure 4-62. *Box and Whisker Plot, Post 1*

Post 2 Survey

An exploratory analysis was conducted on the Post 2 survey data and no missing values were found. The data (n = 26) had a range of 24 (42 min, 66 max), a mean of 58.19, (95% Confidence Interval: 55.31 LL – 61.08 UL), IQR of 11, and a standard deviation of 7.14. All responses fell within the range. There were no outliers detected. The data displayed a platykurtic distribution (see Figures 4-63 and 4-64).

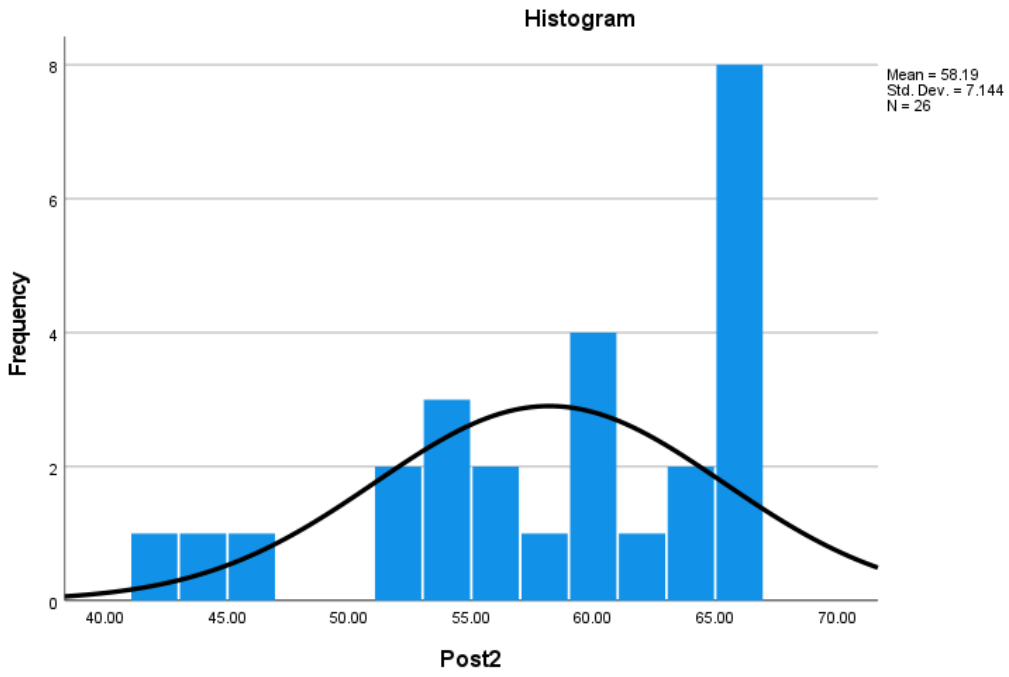

Figure 4-63. *Histogram, Post 2*

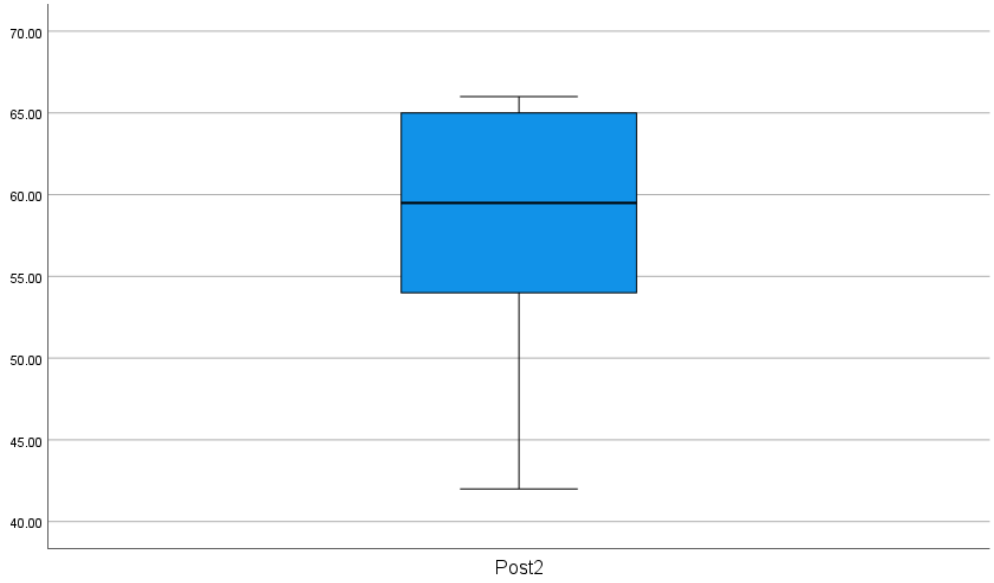

Figure 4-64. *Box and Whisker Plot, Post 2*

Results

After removing the outlier teacher from the datasets, all data were reanalyzed. The results of the paired sample t-tests are reported in Table 4-2.

Table 4-2
Results from Paired Sample t-tests, Removing Outlier Student

Measure	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*df*	*p*	95% CI		Cohen's *d*
						LL	*UL*	
Pre-Survey to Post 1	3.0	5.15	2.968	25	.007	.918	5.082	.582
Post 1 to Post 2	-1.0	5.51	-.926	25	.363	-3.224	1.224	-.182
Pre-Survey to Post 2	2.0	6.48	1.574	25	.128	-.618	4.618	.309

Note. $N = 26$. CI = confidence interval; *LL* = lower limit; *UL* = upper limit.

Ho: Pre-survey scores = post 1 survey scores.
Ha: Pre-survey scores ≠ post 1 survey scores.
(Ha = .05)

As indicated in Table 4-2, there was a change of statistical significance from Pre-Survey to Post 1 ($p = .007$) with a medium effect size, following the week of intensive teacher preparation work. Scores dropped significantly from 1,565 to 1,487. Therefore, we reject the null hypothesis.

Ho: Post 1 scores = post 2 survey scores.
Ha: Post 1 scores ≠ post 2 survey scores.
(Ha = .05)

While scores did increase 26 points from Post 1 to Post 2, following the three week workshop experience with the children, it was not enough to be statistically significant ($p = .363$). Therefore, we fail to reject the null hypothesis.

Ho: Pre-survey scores = post 2 survey scores.
Ha: Pre-survey scores ≠ post 2 survey scores.
(Ha = .05)

Overall, there was a 52 point decline in scores from Pre-Survey to Post 2, but again, it was not of statistical significance ($p = .128$). Therefore, we fail to reject the null hypothesis.

The Importance of Play – Survey Analysis

To look at the data in terms of the various elements of the survey, the data were separated into three different domains: 1) Importance of play, 2) Role of play in learning, and 3) Role of play as curriculum. The results of the paired samples t-tests on the importance of play are reported in Table 4-3.

Table 4-3
Results from Paired Sample t-tests, Importance of Play

Measure	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*df*	*p*	95% CI		Cohen's *d*
						LL	*UL*	
Pre-Survey to Post 1	.577	5.15	1.531	25	.138	-.199	1.353	.300
Post 1 to Post 2	.077	1.79	.219	25	.828	-.645	.799	.043
Pre-Survey to Post 2	.654	2.7	1.236	25	.228	-.436	1.743	.242

Note. $N = 26$. CI = confidence interval; *LL* = lower limit; *UL* = upper limit.

Ho: Pre-survey scores (importance of play) = post 1 survey scores (importance of play).
Ha: Pre-survey scores (importance of play) ≠ post 1 survey scores (importance of play).
(Ha = .05)

As indicated above, there were no statistically significant changes from Pre-Survey to Post 1 scores, as related to the importance of play. The Pre-survey had a composite score of 588. The Post 1 Survey had a composite score of 573, showing a 15 point decrease, though not of statistical significance ($p = .138$). Therefore, we fail to reject the null.

Ho: Post 1 scores (importance of play) = post 2 scores (importance of play).
Ha: Post 1 scores (importance of play) ≠ post 2 scores (importance of play).
(Ha = .05)

The Post 2 Survey had a composite score of 571, displaying a 2 point decrease from Post 1, though it was not statistically significant ($p = .828$). Therefore, we fail to reject the null.

Ho: Pre-survey scores (importance of play) = post 2 survey scores (importance of play).
Ha: Pre-survey scores (importance of play) ≠ post 2 survey scores (importance of play).
(Ha = .05)

Overall, there was a 17 point decrease from Pre-Survey (588) to Post 2 (571), though it was not statistically significant (p = .228). Therefore, we fail to reject the null.

The Role of Play in Learning – Survey Analysis

Next, to determine any growth or change in teachers' perceptions surrounding play as it related to the role of play in learning, a separate analysis was run. Table 4-4 displays the results of the paired samples t-tests.

Table 4-4
Results from Paired Sample t-tests, Role of Play in Learning

Measure	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*df*	*p*	95% CI		Cohen's *d*
						LL	*UL*	
Pre-Survey to Post 1	1.54	3.30	2.376	25	.025	.205	2.872	.466
Post 1 to Post 2	-.038	3.38	-.058	25	.954	-1.402	1.325	-.011
Pre-Survey to Post 2	1.50	3.39	2.259	25	.033	.133	2.87	.443

Note. N = 26. CI = confidence interval; *LL* = lower limit; *UL* = upper limit.

As indicated above, there were two statistically significant changes, as related to the role of play in learning – the initial decline from Pre-Survey to Post 1 (p = .025) and the overall decline from Pre-Survey to Post 2 (p = .033).

Ho: Pre-survey scores (role of play in learning) = post 1 scores (role of play in learning).
Ha: Pre-survey scores (role of play in learning) ≠ post 1 scores (role of play in learning).
(Ha = .05)

The Pre-survey had a composite score of 737. The Post 1 Survey had a composite score of 697, showing a 40 point decrease of statistical significance (p = .025) with a medium effect size. Therefore, we reject the null hypothesis.

Ho: Post 1 scores (role of play in learning) = post 2 scores (role of play in learning).
Ha: Post 1 scores (role of play in learning) ≠ post 2 scores (role of play in learning).
(Ha = .05)

The Post 2 Survey had a composite score of 698, displaying a one point increase from Post 1, however, it was not of statistical significance (p = .954). Therefore, we fail to reject the null hypothesis.

Ho: Pre-survey scores (role of play in learning) = post 2 scores (role of play in learning).
Ha: Pre-survey scores (role of play in learning) ≠ post 2 scores (role of play in learning).
(Ha = .05)

Overall, there was a 39 point decrease of statistical significance (p = .033) with a small effect size from Pre-Survey (737) to Post 2 (698). Therefore, we reject the null hypothesis.

The Role of Play as Curriculum – Survey Analysis

Next, to determine any growth or change in teachers' perceptions surrounding play as it related to the role of play as curriculum, a third series of analyses were run. Results of the paired samples t-tests are displayed in Table 4-5.

Table 4-5
Results from Paired Sample t-tests, Role of Play as Curriculum

Measure	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*df*	*p*	95% CI		Cohen's *d*
						LL	*UL*	
Pre-Survey to Post 1	.846	2.36	1.827	25	.08	-.108	1.8	.358
Post 1 to Post 2	-.923	1.94	-2.43	25	.023	-1.71	-.141	-.48
Pre-Survey to Post 2	-.078	1.96	-.2	25	.843	-.868	.714	-.039

Note. N = 26. CI = confidence interval; *LL* = lower limit; *UL* = upper limit.

Ho: Pre-survey scores (role of play as curriculum) = post 1 survey scores (role of play as curriculum).
Ha: Pre-survey scores (role of play as curriculum) ≠ post 1 survey scores (role of play as curriculum).
(Ha = .05)

As indicated above, there was one statistically significant change, as related to the role of play as curriculum – the increase from Post 1 to Post 2. However, from Pre-Survey to Post 1, there were no statistically significant changes. The Pre-survey had a composite score of 239. The Post 1 Survey had a composite score of 217, showing a 22 point decrease (p = .08). Therefore, we fail to reject the null hypothesis.

Ho: Post 1 scores (role of play as curriculum) = post 2 scores (role of play as curriculum).
Ha: Post 1 scores (role of play as curriculum) ≠ post 2 scores (role of play as curriculum).
(Ha = .05)

The Post 2 Survey had a composite score of 241, resulting in a 24 point increase from Post 1. This increase was of statistical significance (p = .023) with a medium effect size. Therefore, we reject the null hypothesis.

Ho: Pre-survey scores (role of play as curriculum) = post 2 survey scores (role of play as curriculum).
Ha: Pre-survey scores (role of play as curriculum) ≠ post 2 survey scores (role of play as curriculum).
(Ha = .05)

Overall, there was a two point increase from Pre-Survey (239) to Post 2 (241), though it was not statistically significant (p = .843). Therefore, we fail to reject the null hypothesis.

The two items that comprised this part of the survey were as follows: 10. Play-based curriculum is confusing to me; 11. Children learn better from classrooms with standards-based curriculum than play-based curriculum. Both items were reverse coded. Seeing the significant

increase (p = .023) in the role of play as learning, following the three week play and inquiry workshop portion of the practicum, leads me to believe that the experience working directly with the children helped to alleviate confusion around play-based learning, and helped teachers to see the power of a play-based curriculum over a standards-based curriculum. Interview data, reported in the next section, support this notion.

Analysis of Interview Data

Initially, the significant drop in Post 1 scores were somewhat confusing. I questioned whether the intervention was truly helping the teachers understand the theories and methods of play, if there were some elements of confusion, or if the atmosphere during the second round of surveys was causing some teachers to rush through their responses. Unlike the Pre-Survey, given with plenty of time for the teachers to complete, and a quiet atmosphere for them to focus, the Post-1 was administered at the end of a chaotic week. As teachers scrambled to complete their surveys, professors explained expectations for the end of the day, responsibilities the teachers had to close the week, and important things to consider for the following week. The room was loud, teachers seemed rushed, and I wondered whether those elements had an impact on their Post-1 scores, or if their perceptions of play were truly declining after one week. Still, it pushed me to want to find out *why*. I was equally curious why scores then shifted positively, though not statistically significantly, at the conclusion of the workshop, rather than continuing to decline. What was even more interesting was the significant upswing in scores, as related to *the role of play as curriculum* following the three week play and inquiry workshop (p = .023). I wondered if and how the direct experience with the children impacted teachers' perceptions of play, alleviated confusion around play-based learning, and/or shifted their beliefs toward play-based curriculum over standards-based curriculum.

Rather than look at the participant interviews as a separate, distinctly different set of data, I chose to use the interviews to help interpret meaning, holistically, across all forms of data collection. Rather than look for frequency of terms, as I felt that would be limiting, and might possibly steer the research in a different direction, I chose to identify key statements and phrases from the participants to help inform my research questions. This theory-driven type of qualitative research helps us to understand the data within the context of the summer workshop and in relation to the other layers of data collected. It "pushes against traditional qualitative data analysis such as mechanistic coding, reducing data to themes, and writing up transparent narratives… [which] do little to critique the complexities of social life…[as] such simplistic approaches preclude dense and multi-layered treatment of data" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. ii). Jackson and Mazzei, further, (2012) urge researchers to use theory to interpret their data, in an effort to "…accomplish a reading of data that is both within and against interpretivism" (p. vii). While coding and thematic analysis may have a place in some aspects of qualitative research, with this particular study, it seems prudent to consider also the *context* of the workshop and the *complexity* of the participants in the study. Rather than looking simplistically at the themes and codes that frequently emerge, I look critically at the stories of the teachers I grew to know - and I use this insight to help make sense of the data, as a whole. Overarching themes emerge, yes, but organically so. And these themes are used as a convergence of evidence (Saldana, 2015).

Due to the mixed method nature of my research design, participant interviews were used to help bridge the gap between time spent in the field with the teachers and their survey responses. This was done in an effort to better understand, *holistically*, how the teachers' perceptions of play were shifting as a result of this practicum experience. To gain a robust perspective on the impact of the workshop, exactly two-thirds of the participants were

interviewed: 12 graduate students (of 18 total) and 6 undergraduate students (of 9 total), resulting in 18 interviews (of 27 participants total). The interviews that took place during weeks two and four were used to help me understand the trends that were developing. Of the 18 interviews, nine were included in the analysis – exactly one-third of the participants, including six graduate students (of 18 total) and three undergraduate students (of 9 total). A values analysis was employed to help identify both *explicitly stated* and *implicit* values in the interviews with the participants (Daiute, 2014). These values, related to play, helped to give me a holistic understanding of their practicum experience. There were a few overarching themes evident in the interview data that gave insight into the overall decline in the Post-1 survey responses, following the intensive teacher preparation week, as well as the upswing in scores on Post 2, following the three week workshop with the community children. These themes will be addressed as they also relate to the research questions posed in this study (see Figure 4-65).

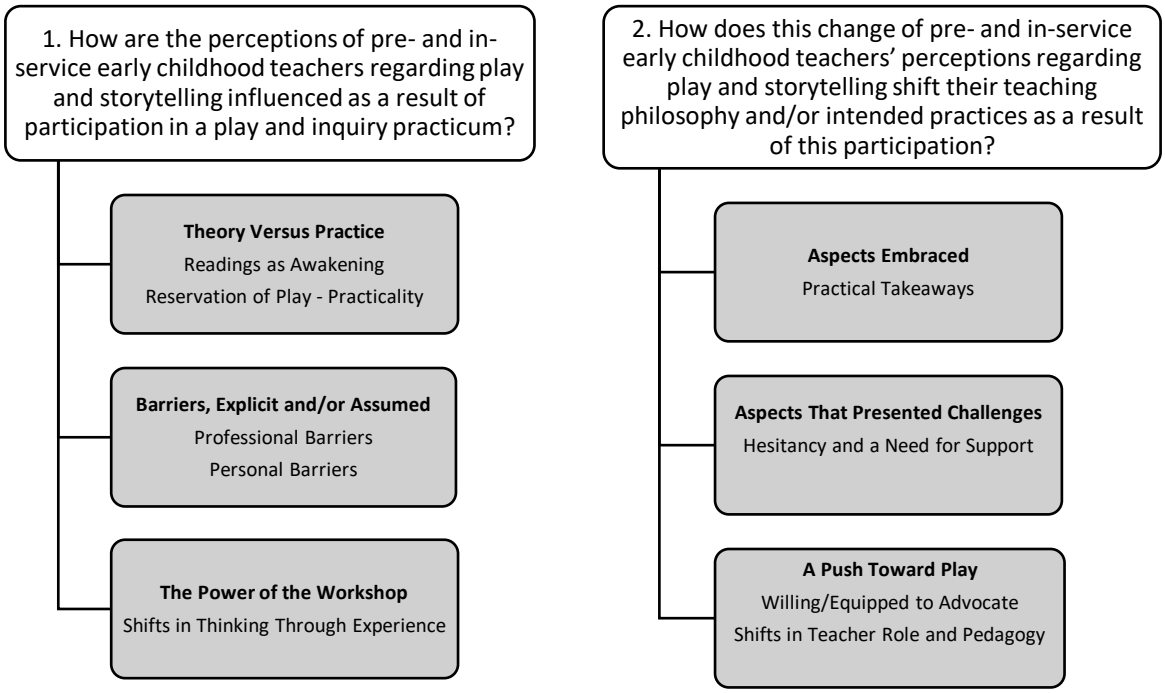

Figure 4-65. *Research Questions and Related Themes and Subthemes*

Research question one, along with the related themes and subthemes, will be addressed in the pages to come.

1. How are the perceptions of pre- and in-service early childhood teachers regarding play and storytelling influenced as a result of participation in a play and inquiry practicum?

Theory Versus Practice

Readings as Awakening

As I got to know the participants, I was better able to understand their perspectives of play and how those perceptions were shifting throughout the summer workshop. As I sought to understand the change, I began to question how they were feeling at the moment regarding play, versus how they felt at the start of the workshop. Many teachers described the awakening they had during the intensive reading week that really helped to shape their understanding of play. Some teachers had experience in play-theory from previous coursework, while others were brand new to the ideas. However, all teachers seemed to have grown more inclined toward play-theory after completing the week of readings.

> The readings really like opened up my mind because I was like, Oh wow, play's this important and I didn't realize how important and how valuable play could be. I just knew like, yeah, it's important. Everyone says it's important… Before the readings, I probably would have been very like average on everything, like, I've heard that play is important because I've heard other teachers talk about it, but I've never experienced it. I've never used it. I didn't know really the value that it had. And so I would said that, yeah, play [is] important, but if you asked me if I wanted to incorporate it in my classroom, I would have said, no, I'm good. (Anne, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 30, 2022)

One pre-service teacher explained the initial confidence she felt with the readings and the uncertainty that developed as she tried to anticipate what to expect as she planned for the workshop with the children.

> I read the articles and it made sense and I was like, 'okay, this is right.' And then they were kind of talking about it and it was super open ended on that side. So [the] articles I felt [were] like, 'This is what's going to happen and here's what to expect.' And then they're like, 'This is what's going to happen - we don't know what to expect,' right? So I kind of felt a little bit more confused after that…generally any other class I've ever taken is like 'there is one direction you always go and this is exactly how to do it.' And this is like, 'you can do it any way you want to, and you are never wrong or never right. You are just here.' So I think that was like really mind blowing because every other class I've had is like, 'nope, this… is this.' (Lauren, personal interview, June 27, 2022)

There were other teachers who resonated with the readings – seeing them as setting the stage for the workshop with the children. Again, resulting in high perceptions toward play.

> Now that I see, and like our readings, I'm like, I can, like, incorporate it here and I can tell my, like, principal, like, 'I think we should add this because of this,' and maybe…maybe they'll let me. I think both [the readings and experience] kind of like go hand in hand because I needed like to read it and, like, discuss it and, like, how I can use it and how I can, like, '*sell it,'* as [the professor] said, to my principal. And then, like, seeing it and seeing my kids doing, I'm like, 'oh my gosh, I can even add this when I tell my principal about it' and I can use like play for this idea and this subject… I can sell it to them by saying, like, this theory and whatever. And then it all comes together. (Lila, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 15, 2022)

Another first-year teacher shared of the initial impact of the readings, theoretically, and how her perspective continued to change as she shifted into the hands-on experience of the workshop.

> I feel like you can theorize and think about what it's going to be like as much as you want, which is nice to have like the background information. But really *being in it* is when your perspective can change and like when you're actually learning and seeing from the other kids. (Jane, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 28, 2022)

Julie, too, felt that the readings helped to open her eyes to the methods of play – a concept she had never before encountered through her undergraduate or graduate teacher preparation work.

> I think I've learned the most with the play and inquiry from the reading week because I had never experienced anything like that. And so that was like the first, like, tangible thing that I got to read about. But I think in the following weeks when we get to go to the constructive play…I think that'll be different for me. (Julie, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 17, 2022)

She went on to explain how the awakening she felt with the readings was soon confronted with the reality of how the workshop would come together.

> [I had an] awakening during the readings. I feel like…it wasn't even, like, in my wheelhouse. And then during the planning week, [my perceptions] kind of like went down a little bit because it was so conceptual and just like talking about it instead of reading or seeing actual situations… (Julie, personal interview, June 17, 2022)

Like Julie, there were other teachers who would struggle to find the practicality of play as they attempted to bridge the gap between the readings and the workshop. This information helped me to understand why scores started so high, given that surveys had been completed after

the initial week of readings. This initial passion for play, however, would seem to stifle for some in only a few short days.

Reservation of Play – Practicality

To better understand the decline in scores from the Pre- to Post-1 surveys, again I sought answers from the participants directly. What I found was an interesting shift between the *theoretical* aspects of play and the *practical* aspects of its use in the classroom. It seemed that the majority of teachers who expressed a decline in their perceptions of play, felt that, theoretically, they understood its value, but had reservations about how it would work practically in the classroom. These reservations were brought to light during the initial intensive week of teacher preparation work. As they worked together with their peers to plan for the summer workshop, their initial passion for play was confronted with reality. They questioned whether this theory would be practically applicable – if it would actually *work.*

One in-service teacher spoke of her reservation of how play would practically integrate into a classroom as a means of curriculum.

> When I first started it, like play was a good idea, but I never really knew how it would work in the classroom because I'm very [standards] based, like this is what I'm supposed to teach and this is a lesson plan surrounding it. So it was hard for me to imagine how I would make a play/[standards] space, and get them to learn all the things they needed to learn. And I'm still navigating that… (Anne, personal interview, June 30, 2022)

Another in-service teacher shared similar reservations of practicality. While the theory was sound, he believed, there were aspects that may not work in a classroom setting.

> I think the practical [aspect] of it, is also like I've been saying, like, that is my biggest hurdle. I don't… I'm still learning that myself. Like by interacting with them, like, the

> way I would handle things might not always… fit into play theory. And I think that's okay. Because not every theory is the only way how human beings learn. And like there's a lot of different learning theories because there's a lot of different ways of learning for different contexts. So I think in my head I need to let go a little bit and be like, 'it doesn't always apply to every context' if that makes sense… there are things that are out of my circle of control, but it is frustrating. (Arlo, personal interview, June 17, 2022)

He went on to explain the mental exhaustion he faced as he considered how to intertwine this play-based theory with practice.

> Yeah, I think it was the realities of the exhaustion… play is very exhausting. That's if you, if you… if you're thinking about it in a critical way. You could just sit on the floor or whatever, but I feel like if I'm going to do this, I'm going to go full force. And I'm going to put a lot of energy into it. (Arlo, personal interview, June 17, 2022)

Another pre-service teacher expressed her reservations at the start of the summer practicum, and how those uncertainties were made clearer as she began to see it unfold in the classroom.

> I think normally it's highlighted like, okay, we need to stop, play, and get more into curriculum things and it's a lot easier when you mix them together because then maybe it's easier for the child to associate school with more fun things, than, 'oh my gosh,' like 'I have to just constantly work' and…also they can recognize that sometimes the real world does look like playing, or maybe education does look like playing. And I think that at first I was kind of like, 'oh, I don't know if that's actually true' but now I see firsthand. It *is* true, in my opinion. (Lauren, personal interview, June 27, 2022)

She went on to explain the process of trying to *unlearn* things as a necessity for children and teachers, alike.

> Trying to unlearn things, I think is where it becomes hard to learn new things. And maybe whenever they go back to their other classrooms relearning certain things because the teachers aren't here, not everybody's here [at the summer workshop] to learn [about the power of play]. (Lauren, pre-service teacher, personal interview, June 27, 2022)

Another in-service teacher who seemed to embrace the theoretical aspects of play had initial reservations about how it would work in the classroom, noting that through experience, she gained clarity.

> It's more just like finding a way to like insert [play] into my classroom whenever we are expected to be so structured. So yeah, I think that's my only thing. And then like how different does it work for every grade or is it supposed to be the same for every grade? …And like sometimes just tying it back to some of the standards because, like, I know how my students are learning, growing from it, but again, like asking my principal, 'can I do it for this?' Like I need to be able to really, like, set up a whole plan pretty much. So I'm, like, right now working on that. But yeah, I think as I'm doing it more and as we talk about it more, it's like really helpful. (Lila, personal interview, June 15, 2022)

Reyna shared similar reservations on how play would realistically work in the classroom, referencing her love for play-theory, but admitting the need to create a *balance.*

> I'm like, okay, I really love this. I've been loving this for years, but it's like, just, realistically, how do you appropriately incorporate that and still have a balance of the curriculum that has to be done?...I think I have a really, really good idea about the play, but I think maybe in the back of my mind, too, it's also thinking of balancing how realistic it's going to look in a classroom and curriculum and of like what you, again, me fighting for it and advocating it and even if I can. So I think that's the thing of like, okay,

> we're giving them this control…But like I think that just that balance is what I'm figuring out now…I really want them to have choice. I want them to have those aspects of play. But, also, I do have to go with the, you know, the curriculum and the school system. (Reyna, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 27, 2022)

She went on to explain the need to personally relinquish control in order for play to realistically work in her classroom.

> I think it's the control because I know, like, especially in my kindergarten classroom…it's so hard to relinquish that control to them and let them be independent. Because I know when I was starting out…I was sharing, like, earlier about like the scissors or like even being scared of them using glue and like, 'oh my gosh, like you're going to put all the glue everywhere and you're going to cut your hair and everything.' Like, relinquishing that control and be like, 'no.' Like, 'you're experimenting; you're exploring; you're researching'… So I think learning that, that's the most important thing of like just breathe, calm down, like, let them like explore and let them research. (Reyna, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 27, 2022)

Jane, too, expressed initial optimism surrounding play, which was then confronted with the realities of the challenges it also poses in the classroom.

> …before we even c[a]me into this, I had like a mindset of how awesome this is in general and how important it is. And I think…the reality set in of, I still think it's awesome, and I do think teachers should take the time to work and put this into their classrooms. But it's hard. And so I think, like, if anything, it was more of just like a realistic shift in the sense of everyone should still do, like, do this, but definitely take the time to understand it and prepare yourself for the fact that, like, your classroom is going to get messy… I still think

> it's really, really important. I just think it's harder than you might think it would be going into it. And so I think that's probably what that shift is, is the perception of just… it's amazing, but it is challenging. (Jane, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 28, 2022)

She went on to explain elements of uncertainty she had regarding play - and the shifts that occurred as she tried to connect the theoretical aspects of play, inherent in the readings, to the practical aspects of how to use it.

> I feel like it's just more that, there's always more I can learn. And I feel like the more I watch kids do it, the more clear it becomes, the more comfortable it becomes. And I think the only piece that I would say is like challenging or confusing is the piece of like, how do I take this from a preschool where play is different than it is necessarily for like a fourth grade or fifth grade…kid? And I feel like during the reading it was, where, it was more confusing because you're trying to like envision what it's going to be like. But once you're actually here and getting to see it, I feel like that's made it a lot more clear. I think I have more clarity getting to see it happen. (Jane, personal interview, June 28, 2022)

While finding the readings to be enlightening, Julie also struggled during the teacher preparation week, to see play practically working in the classroom.

> I think during the planning week, it was less…It's very conceptual instead of like seeing it. And I think when I read, I could like actually picture it happening. But during the planning week, it was kind of all over the place. And so I was like, 'I don't know if this stuff is even going to happen'…I was like, 'I don't even know if this is going to work.' (Julie, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 17, 2022)

These initial reservations of how play would realistically work in the classroom were also coupled with other concerns that teachers felt may not be able to be overcome in the classroom, either for personal or professional reasons. Next, the barriers will be discussed, whether explicit or assumed, and the impact those made on the teachers' perceptions of play.

Barriers, Explicit and/or Assumed

Professional Barriers

In the same way, there were themes of barriers that did not seem to exist in the workshop, but were a reality for these public school teachers. What was interesting to me, here, was that when I went through the workshop myself, many years prior, I had not considered these barriers as a private school teacher. I had been able to take what I learned and use it in my classroom the following year. My administration was supportive, and I had the freedom to practice how I wished within the walls of a private school. However, these teachers were all public school educators, and the reality they faced was much more rigid. There were countless stories of scripted curriculum, set lesson plans, and strict administration that would not allow this kind of open-ended play into the classroom. One in-service teacher shared the expectations of her school, in terms of curriculum.

> And so with standards based or curriculum based instruction, you know, it's just very much… I've got my entire year laid out to me, and the third week of school I'm supposed to be teaching this phonics skill and this science lesson. And that's what I stick to and that's what I'm - not required, but that's what I'm *supposed* to stick to. And so that's based on, you know, some hierarchy who has decided that. (Anne, personal interview, June 30, 2022)

She went on to explain her early teaching experiences, her influences of mentor teachers who were more classical in approach, and how those years impacted her classroom pedagogy.

> The first school that I taught at, we were a team of three and I loved my team. But both of my teammates were on their way out, like, they were retiring in the next couple of years. And your first couple of years of teaching is really where you absorb so much. And it was very much: you come in; you sit down; I teach; you listen; you do the work; you turn it in; and I grade it, and that's it. And so I've gotten away from that, but I feel like that's still instilled in me. Like: this is our room; these are the rules; this is what we're going to do. (Anne, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 30, 2022)

Another in-service teacher voiced the barriers of the educational system, as a whole, and how learning through play is counterintuitive to everything he has learned in his teacher preparation work, as well as in his experience as a public school teacher.

> In education right now, like we're focused on outcomes and what those outcomes should look like and what mastery is. So it really boggles my mind to think like there's no gauge or mastery…on play. Right? Like, what they're doing is valid and they're learning from that… [but] it counteracts everything that I've learned so far as a teacher in education or [in] public education. (Arlo, personal interview, June 17, 2022)

He went on to explain barriers that do not seem exist at the workshop, but that are a reality for him, as a public school teacher.

> To be honest, it's… I feel like I've had so many more barriers go up in my head about play… not in a bad way…I'm thinking about: how does this fit into the system that I work in?...There are barriers as an educator that you have, like, for maybe students that have accommodations or behavior intervention teams, that there are, there are things that

> play might not be equitable, um, in such a constructed environment, like a public school. Here [at the workshop] it is. It's fairly equitable. Like there's not many barriers… so it's in my brain. I'm thinking, like, how can I infuse this in the most accessible way for all students while still giving it validity? And it's really hard. It's really, really hard…And it's frustrating because I want to use…I want to use more of it… So I think in my head, it's like this internal battle because I know this is where I align with learning the most, but it's like it's completely opposite from what I'm expected to do as an educator. (Arlo, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 17, 2022)

Another in-service teacher shared her concerns as a first-year teacher, the demands of her school district, and her desire to include play in her classroom, if at all possible.

> Like this past year, like…I [didn't] know how to let them play. Like, we have a very, like, strict curriculum. I got to teach them all these TEKS, all these standards… even if it's not, like, full on, like, free play, I can like, add like little aspects of it… that's what I want to do…. But, like, going in and doing it, I get second grade. I was like, 'oh my gosh, I have so much to teach.' Like, I need to just, like, teach a curriculum and do it how they say. But I'm like, if I can mess with that a little bit, like know that like we talked about, it's really helpful, like reading the book and like all the stories and, and then seeing the kids make what they're making. I'm like, I could add that in somewhere. (Lila, personal interview, June 15, 2022)

She went on to explain how she felt young children learned best, but the pressure she felt from her administration to do what she was expected to do.

> I've always thought that's how they learn but, like, teaching was so different. I was like, 'this is so weird to me.' Like, I almost feel like a robot sometimes. I was like, 'okay,

> we're going to learn this today, read our objectives, let's do a reading, let's look at the anchor chart' or whatever. And instead, like, I want to read a book and I want them to tell me, 'what did you learn from it?' Yeah, I want to give them, like, materials, and I want to say, 'you make something - what [did] you learn from it?' Like, 'how did you go about doing this?' Because they learn, like, a lot from doing instead of like seeing and me telling them. And then, like, they can learn from each other like through play. Like they get to come together and like they help each other solve problems, they help each other build things. And so obviously I think that's a lot more natural. So [play] was like what I *want* to do. But then it's like what I'm told to do is very different. (Lila, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 15, 2022)

Other teachers shared similar experiences – feeling the need to incorporate play, but the push from administration to adhere to curriculum.

> I think [play is] truly important in education. But then when I started teaching this past year, I thought it was going to be all play. I had my toys all ready, I had all kinds of play ready. And then it just wasn't that. It was just curriculum, curriculum, curriculum, and especially my campus. They were very, like, I had a principal who would even comment on like, 'why are they coloring? They're coloring like so much. What are they coloring?' And I'm like…'they're in kindergarten,' like, 'they need to be doing something fun' and…especially early childhood, learning, like, education is fun and we want to be lifelong learners. (Reyna, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 27, 2022)

She went on to express barriers of the educational system, as a whole, the overreliance on scores, and the failure to see the child as a whole person.

> …and I think with the education system, too, and you know, what I'm learning now is that they're just pulling on scores, scores, scores. And that's what I thought I hated and I didn't want to be as a teacher…Like, the child is not a number. They are not only just their scores…instead of like, you know, 'I'm a scientist.' 'I'm…a storyteller.' I mean, you know…'I'm important.' 'I can learn amazing things and contribute' and, you know, 'be an amazing person to society.' Like, that's what's so important… But just the…skills or the life skills or the social skills, the emotional skills, all of the above. That's in play. It's like, why wouldn't you? (Reyna, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 27, 2022)

Julie, an in-service teacher, also felt pressure to conform to curriculum, even when she felt compelled to follow the children's interests.

> …my district is very strict, very curriculum-based, [which] is nice because they actually have it all planned out…but I definitely look at the standards last because it's the meaningful connections that the kids make that…very performance task, very projects, very hands on learning. I feel like, yeah, um, is what I *try* to focus on, but I also get kind of scared, you know, when I don't do [curriculum] for writing… I'm over the curriculum…It makes me sad sometimes. (Julie, personal interview, June 17, 2022)

Clara, a pre-service teacher, pointed to the collegiality she felt she had at the workshop, that may not be available to her as she took on a classroom of her own – eliciting to large classroom sizes and a lack of support. "I think it was awesome in this experience that we had like four teachers being able to help around. And especially when you have a classroom with like 25 students, it's hard being the only teacher in there" (Clara, personal interview, June 30, 2022).

While teachers faced the realities of their school systems and administration, they were also confronted with their own realities – personal barriers that might preclude them from incorporating play in their classrooms.

Personal Barriers

For some, there were personal barriers in terms of leaving standard curriculum for a play-based curriculum. One participant described her personal reservations, as a second-grade teacher.

> I mean, there's just so much that I know that, like, my students need to learn with, like, writing. And I don't think that if I just did like the play and inquiry workshop type, that they would really learn all of the different types of narrative writing and expository and all those things. Like I know that it couldn't just be….sorry my *personal reservation* that tells me, like, I can't just, like, jump off from the way that I've been teaching for eight years. And so that's why I feel like I would need to start slow. I'm not saying that I don't think [I] could get there, but I don't think I could make it there without more experience in it. (Anne, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 30, 2022)

Another participant expressed similar concerns which had caused some confusion for her.

> I think just the idea that you could really translate every single play thing somehow into a subject [is confusing]. I think trying to make sense of that a little bit and come up with it off the top of my head. Sometimes it's a little bit hard…And so, I don't know, just little things where you could connect it so that they could understand, even if it's not on a super wide scale, maybe they're going to remember it one day. (Lauren, pre-service teacher, personal interview, June 27, 2022)

Lila, a first year teacher, expressed a disconnect between what she *wanted* to do, and the fear and uncertainty that kept her from following through in the classroom.

> I feel like, in my mind, I wanted to be a play-based teacher, but I didn't know how especially with like all the stuff I was given, and I was at like a super strict campus, like *super* strict. So I was like scared to be any sort of play based… that's what I *wanted* to do. But I feel like I wasn't doing it all year because I didn't know how, and I was like scared to do it. So like in my mind I wanted to be that teacher, but I was not. (Lila, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 15, 2022)

Another first-year teacher described her own reservations about the prospect of losing her job by trying to deviate from the expectations of her school.

> I ha[d] a principal [who]…would make those comments of like, you know, 'why are you doing this?' 'It should look like this, and do that.' And so I just, you know, being a first year teacher, not wanting, you know, wanting to keep my job, I'm like, 'okay, like, I'll, you know, do what you say. I'll do this.' I didn't really, you know, have any, like, backbone yet. Of, like, 'this is why, like, I firmly believe this'… I didn't feel like I had any authority, or, like, seniority. You know? Like. 'Why?' Like, 'you're a first-year teacher. What do you,' you know, 'what do you know?' (Reyna, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 27, 2022)

A pre-service teacher shared her inner struggle between wanting to allow the children to lead, but also feeling compelled to step in, at times.

> I don't really, really know how to explain that because I feel like even with the play stuff, I sometimes forget that it's supposed to be, like, student-led…So I'm still like 'oh, like if you do it like this'…so I feel like there's a part of me that always wants to be, like, facilitating… (Josie, personal interview, June 16, 2022)

She went on to explain her reservations of incorporating play as a new teacher, and the need to rely on curriculum as she gains her footing – noting that certain elements of play-based learning are harder for her to grasp.

> I definitely think like when I first start out, it will definitely be, like, I'm following like the standards first, because I'm still going to want to get, like, my footing. But I think as I like become, like, more of a veteran teacher, I'll probably, like, implement more like play and like individual interests and stuff like that. But I think at first it will definitely be like more curriculum based, which I don't want it to be, but I think I need to, like, figure it out, before I go off the walls… I feel like it's hard to pinpoint, like what your standards…are, like, really like being implemented in certain elements of play. And so I feel like that's why I would rather steer towards curriculum than play. Because, like [standards] are being applied, but I feel like it is just difficult for me to, like, pinpoint which ones and like where. (Josie, pre-service teacher, personal interview, June 16, 2022)

Jane expressed the inner conflict of wanting to allow her children to learn through play, but also recognizing the physical and mental challenges that teachers face in this kind of environment.

> [Play] is more, like, physically, this is more demanding just because you need to really be on your toes and not putting yourself into the situation as much, but, like, you do need to be prepared if a kid does need something or you know, they're out there with the hammers, accidently whack themselves, like, you're a little bit more on your toes, I think, in this situation. And so that's a little bit more challenging…I think this is less tolling on a teacher in the sense of academics, like, I know that they're going to learn through this. I think this is more challenging in just having to release that control and having to just kind of watch and be like, 'oh, you might hurt yourself,' but like, 'I know you're going to be

> okay.' Or like, 'oh, you might learn this piece that I wanted you to learn, but it might be in a different way than I thought.' (Jane, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 28, 2022)

She went on to explain the open-mindedness that she felt was necessary for a teacher to able to embrace this kind of approach in the classroom.

> I am a pretty open-minded teacher and person when it comes to this kind of stuff. And I could see you needing to be to do this program just because it does take a lot of, like, a release to let it happen. (Jane, personal interview, June 28, 2022)

These stories helped me to better understand the drop in overall composite scores from the Pre-survey to the Post 1 survey, following the intensive teacher preparation week. While still finding value in play, teachers seemed to waver on its practicality; they wondered how the theory could make its way into the workshop, and ultimately, into their own classrooms.

The Power of the Workshop

Shifts in Thinking Through Experience

Because the Pre- and Post-1 surveys did not give the data I had expected, I was unsure as to what the final survey would unveil. What was interesting was the shift back *toward* a play-based pedagogy, especially considering the significant drop in Post-1 scores. Again, to make sense of the survey data, I went back to the interviews with the participants. One recurring theme in the interview data was the power of the play and inquiry workshop – the hands-on practicum experience. There were many teachers who shared sentiments of not truly understanding play-based learning until seeing its power in a tangible way. While reading and writing about theory served a particular purpose, there seemed to be something more compelling about getting to experience it first-hand. One in-service teacher explained her shift from the theoretical aspects of

play to the practical application of it, noting tangible ways she could bring play into her classroom in a way that works for her.

> I think like after the readings, I mean, I *loved* the readings that they gave the grad. students. I think that after the readings, I really knew that play was important. And then through the experiences of the rooms, I've tried to pick out things that I could easily incorporate into my classroom. (Anne, personal interview, June 30, 2022)

She went on to explain the impact of the workshop and the influence it made on her perceptions of how children learn best.

> Originally I thought that this was going to be chaos. Like, 'open your doors and let the children go wherever they want, to any room.' And I'm picturing chaos in my mind because who tells a three-year-old, 'you can go wherever you want; go pick a room'? And so, I feel like that choice and that trust, like, being able to trust the kids and knowing that they can make the choice and to influence their learning and what they need at that time, I think that's been the most influential for me, and that's what I've really taken away from this, is that I don't give kids enough credit. Like they're so responsible; they can be responsible for their own learning. And I think that if we just give them that room, that they will take it and run with it and surprise us. (Anne, personal interview, June 30, 2022)

Another in-service teacher, too, found that the workshop experience helped to make sense of the readings – bridging the gap between theory and practice. He mentioned the importance of going through the experience with colleagues who were also being pushed in new directions and pushing him to think critically, as well.

> The reading can only do so much until you get your hands on, and then you, like, realign yourself in the literature with other colleagues that will, like, push you to think critically

> and question what you're doing and *why* you're doing it and…what should we change and why…I feel maybe there should have been more check ins where we could have…refocused and realigned because, again, play is very broad and open. So defining what that looks like for us as a set of teachers…[to] voice our ideas, wonderings, questions, opinions.. And then hopefully generate things next week that may be…more inviting or more equitable for the kids. I think that that has been cool to collaborate with other educators that have a similar mindset. (Arlo, personal interview, June 17, 2022)

The experience also seemed to alleviate some confusion for the teachers – whether they were confused by practical aspects of play or how to incorporate it. One in-service teacher spoke of his uncertainties of the "unspoken rules of this space" and how the workshop experience was helping to shape his perceptions.

> I think it's still shaping. Like we had a good conversation about it today. Again, more questions that pose more questions. But I think this next week will be interesting to see how we all shift as a group of educators since we've asked each other these questions now… See, like, what gets put into action, because we've had some ideas shared. And it's been beneficial. (Arlo, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 17, 2022)

A pre-service teacher also shared similar thoughts in regard to the hands-on experience the summer workshop provided, especially following the reading and teacher preparation work.

> I feel like you could go to class all day long, and [be] lecture[d], and they can tell you exactly how it's going to be. But until you're in front of those kids, you're not going to know. And I feel like I've grown so much over this semester alone… And I felt really unprepared for kids and I was like, 'I am going to be teaching a class in a year and what am I going to do?'...And now I feel like, 'okay, I know how to talk to kids. I know how to

> respond in situations that are not easy'…There's textbook ways to control things, but it's like, 'okay, what if this kid just isn't having it? What are you going to do now?' So I feel like even just this last two weeks, I'm able to like, see how to respond to kids or how to even talk to them where they feel understood, I think. (Lauren, personal interview, June 27, 2022)

She went on to share how her own understanding of play was shifting throughout the practicum experience, referring to specific moments at the workshop that were foundational for her.

> I think that I'm changing the way that I think about certain things, because before I thought it was super serious when in fact, like, I don't think that education needs to be that serious. It can be fun and playful. It doesn't have to just be, all learning. And even if you are playing, you're still learning in a way that can help you with learning in class… I think I do now see [play and learning as] intermingling. But before I didn't see it. Yeah, but being able to connect things…there was a little girl that had a bowl of water outside in the science outdoor play and she had a straw and I thought she was going to drink it, but she started blowing bubbles into the water, and then she used a dropper and she saw that that made bubbles, too. So like, even things that are like scientific. She was making her own experiment in her head, a three-year-old through play, and it was just like revolutionary. It kind of like circled back and was like, this is actually a purpose…That was my moment. (Lauren, pre-service teacher, personal interview, June 27, 2022)

Lila, too, found herself more inclined toward a play-based pedagogy after experiencing it firsthand through the workshop.

> I've always wanted to be more play based, but now I'm like, 'oh, I can do it by doing this.' It's been very helpful, so yeah, it's good… I always knew there were like benefits

> to, I know, like, effective and helping kids learn. But as we talk about it, as I'm seeing it and I see those connections being made and I see it like happening because I haven't seen it really happen before… I'm really like, I don't want to say like *buying into it* more, but I'm like, 'I can use this, I can use this.' Like, I can find ways to use it. So it's definitely positive and like, I really, really want to use it. I'm going to find ways. (Lila, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 15, 2022)

Reyna also found great impact in workshop, specifically in the importance of allowing the children to take control of their own learning.

> I think the experience has been the most impactful. Just seeing kids…explore like even in the painting room. Like, just, I think choice is the big thing of it, of like talking in a way of giving children choice of like, 'I want to do this.' So like, you know, this is why they should choose what they want to do instead of us. Again, just like saying, 'this is what you need to do; this is how you need to do it.' The, like, just letting them choose and letting them kind of, like, letting them be in control of their own learning… (Reyna, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 27, 2022)

She went on to explain the power of hands-on learning, for children and teachers alike.

> And I think it's like seeing them all do different things and just having them just explore, have fun, like be, you know, have fun at school and create that relationship of like I can learn and it doesn't have to be so much sitting down or… like, yeah, 'learning is supposed to be fun; it's supposed to be active.' I know, like, especially in my early childhood kindergarten students, like, I could tell them and talk and talk and talk, but they wouldn't learn it until they did it and put their hands on it. So I think that that was so important of just having the kids actively, you know, collaborate, work together. Like all of those

> things were just, it's truly magic. I really, truly believe that's magic. I, I love it. (Reyna, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 27, 2022)

Further, she discussed how aspects of play-based learning that were confusing to her were made clearer as she gained experience with them throughout the workshop, specifically in terms of verbal mapping.

> I remember talking about [verbal mapping] through undergrad, but I think it was like, you know, it was one of those like, okay. But I also didn't see it in action. And I think this experience of seeing it in action and practicing it and doing it has really, really opened my eyes of like, 'yeah, that's exactly right.' Why do I have to put my judgment on anything? You know, just seeing it and telling it like it is. And they can put their, you know, judgment on it. I think those experiences definitely flourished that. (Reyna, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 27, 2022)

Josie, a pre-service teacher, expressed the impacts of the practicum experience on her own understanding of a teacher's role.

> I've learned so much like already, and it hasn't been that long. Granted, we have smashed, like, a lot into a little bit of time, but I feel like I am learning a lot and I do think that things being student-led is important now because I feel like in all…my other classes, it's always been like when you facilitate a lesson, when you teach a lesson. It's not really like about student involvement. It's just like, 'what are you going to do as a teacher?' So I feel like I have learned a lot… being with the other teachers, being able to, like, ask questions, watch videos, and like get everyone's opinions and like interpretations of lessons. I feel like that was most important… but I feel like, as a whole, learning, like, being with the kids has been also really important. The readings, of course, are important, but like

there's the more hands-on learning with the kids, is like, what's probably the most helpful. (Josie, personal interview, June 16, 2022)

A first-year teacher explained the impact of the workshop, even after having done previous play-based work in her undergraduate program.

> Um, in undergrad…I did like a block class of this, but it wasn't as in depth. I didn't get to be like the facilitator and the teacher. It was more, like, we just kind of went in and helped. Um, and so this is definitely a lot more experience, but I had gotten to see it, so I knew that I was excited to see it on a lengthier level and more in-depth level… (Jane, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 28, 2022)

She also went on to explain how the exposure she gained, not only with the children, but working alongside other teachers in the workshop, helped to shape her understanding of what it means to learn through play.

> I think that actually being in it with the kids, um, just because you're able to interact more…But also another piece of it is I'm getting to watch other teachers do it. And so I get, like, real-life time of watching people. Like, 'oh, that was maybe a mistake.' Like, 'let's do it differently.' Or, I'm getting to see kids, like, work around the problems that they're finding within what they're playing with or learning. And so I definitely think this is the bigger learning aspect for me. (Jane, personal interview, June 28, 2022)

Julie, an in-service teacher, also found power in the hands-on experience the workshop provided, noting the shifts in her own thinking that occurred as she worked with the children directly and observed the learning that was unfolding.

> I think getting to see, especially, because, like, the kids…they're all ages. And so seeing them being so interested in this, too. Like, I was at first thinking like just three, four or

> five-year-olds would benefit from this. But like seeing those kids also having so much fun, that was is pretty interesting. So I definitely think that I wasn't aware of that situation of play-based learning being so valuable because I'd never experienced it before or seen it like in a Gen. Ed. classroom. And now that we're actually like in a school and seeing it happening…it's pretty cool. (Julie, personal interview, June 17, 2022)

She expressed how formative the experience had been on her understanding of how play would work, realistically, in the classroom.

> I guess before reading and before actually doing it, I feel like play-based was almost like a like a deviation. It's like, here's what the state wants us to do or the school district or the whatever…Here's what they want us to do, but here's what I'm going to do instead. But now seeing like the connections between, like, especially…looking at the guidelines, like, seeing what we gave them and what they got from it… it just makes more sense, especially for younger kids. (Julie, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 17, 2022)

Clara, a pre-service teacher, spoke to the impact the hands-on experience made on her, especially after having reflected back on the readings.

> I don't really take in information by reading all the time. It doesn't really help me too much. I like to experience things, personally…I do think a bunch of the experiences I've had with the kids does reflect on the readings that we read, but I just feel like I've gathered a lot more helpful information actually being with the kids. (Clara, personal interview, June 30, 2022)

She went on to explain how her own values surrounding play had shifted in a practical sense over the course of the summer workshop.

> I didn't really know what to expect [coming in] and I have always valued play, but not really to the extent… because I mean, when we're thinking about a classroom, it's hard to include play and curriculum and all of this stuff. But I think this whole experience has showed me like different ways I can use play while also teaching curriculum and like intertwining those. And I do think…my value of play has grown since this experience. (Clara, pre-service teacher, personal interview, June 30, 2022)

These stories helped me to understand how the teachers' perceptions of play were *shifting* as a result of the practicum experience. I then looked to discover themes that would help me understand how those changes in perception would *impact their approach* to the classroom.

Research question two, along with the related themes and subthemes, will be addressed in the pages to come.

2. How does this change of pre- and in-service early childhood teachers' perceptions regarding play and storytelling shift their teaching philosophy and/or intended practices as a result of this participation?

Aspects That Were Embraced

Practical Takeaways – Storytelling

From the interview responses, it seemed that many teachers felt like the storytelling and story acting curriculum would be one of the more beneficial ways to incorporate play into their classroom. Being a fairly straightforward literacy activity, many felt that they could *sell it* to their administration.

One in-service teacher spoke of her initial reservation with the storytelling room, and how she grew to understand its value in the classroom and the passion for literacy it brought to the children.

> I was really afraid of the storytelling room because I was worried that students would tell me a story that I wouldn't understand and, like, I wouldn't be able to write it grammatically correct, or no, I *would* write it grammatically correct and not the way that they told me the story. Or I would interject too much, like, it was very much a hands-off approach. Like you write it exactly as they say it. And I was worried I wouldn't be able to do that because if you tell me a sentence that's grammatically incorrect, I want to correct you. I want to tell you the correct tense or, you know, making sure that you have all of the different parts of the sentence. And so that room scared me. But whenever I went in there, they had the best stories. (Anne, personal interview, June 30, 2022)

She went on to give an example of the storytelling process, and how the children were growing and changing as a result of it.

> This one student had a story about a zoo, drew a beautiful giraffe. By the way, I was very impressed…about a giraffe who is stuck in a zoo and didn't have any friends, but then there was also a dog in the zoo who didn't have any friends, so they made a play date with each other, and they became best friends and they live happily ever after… and like they didn't even have to think about it. I was like, 'would you like to tell me a story?' And they just rattled off this entire story. And I kept saying, 'is that all?' And they just keep adding to the story. It had a beginning, a middle, and end. It had characters, it had a great setting… like it had all the parts to a good story. And this is, I think [they] were four… like they had a great story and then they took their story and illustrated it. I mean, all of those things without any direct teaching, they were able to do that. So especially like incorporating more of the storytelling elements, like, would you like to tell a story?

> Would you like to make a book? That's exciting to kids. And I think through those things, they're learning literacy, right? (Anne, personal interview, June 30, 2022)

Another in-service teacher spoke of the ways he would practically integrate aspects of the storytelling room, to compliment the literacy work and research he was already doing with his children.

> I found, like, the storytelling/story acting, like, I want to integrate that. I feel like that's the next piece that I'm missing of my puzzle right now… Around writer's workshop… specifically in writing identity. So I feel like this… looking back on it…that would have been nice for my [classroom] research. I felt like I missed a little component, but I think it's like a learning process. I don't know if my mind was there yet fully. Like, I needed to experience the curriculum itself and what it had to offer. And then, like, now I need to infuse what my kids have to offer, if that makes sense. (Arlo, June 17, 2022)

He went on to explain the benefits of using the storytelling curriculum in the classroom, and his own shifts in thinking that occurred as he experienced it first-hand.

> I think the way that writing becomes so much more dynamic and alive is how the kids experience it. So them taking those live action experiences and putting it on paper, that itself, that act is pretty transformative… Because that's the kid's authentic work, like… they said then three times, that's what I'm writing as they're dictating to me. And then on their own, when we're acting it out as a group, live editing happens. And revision, and then by the time they get to their book, they've essentially gone through the writing process. And then whatever they create, whether it be with lines or actual letters, like that's their authentic work and that's what matters, like, that progression from nothing to

> something… So like, it's a, it's a shift in your brain. (Arlo, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 17, 2022)

Lauren, too, embraced the storytelling aspects of the program, and expressed her intentions of using those methods in her future classroom.

> I think using our storytelling into maybe language or writing in general, I think would be really important because they're… the author. They never got the chance to do this before. So I think that that would create an exciting element at the same time as, uh, it would be like play with school. So I think that they would enjoy something like that and I think I would incorporate that. Even in the book making, because that's a big part of it, too. (Lauren, pre-service teacher, personal interview, June 27, 2022)

Though Reyna had previous experience with the storytelling curriculum in her undergraduate work, she explained how much deeper her understanding of it became as she watched the children engage in it firsthand.

> I love the storytelling story acting. I remember doing that undergrad too, because like, oh yeah, like they can say whatever and you write it down and like that's what it is…That's just so, it's, like, truly crazy to me, but also, like, 'wow, that's so powerful.' Like, that's so magical, again. And I think, again, this experience of, like, seeing it again and experiencing it *with* the children. Because…when we were undergrad, we just did it as like a whole class and we didn't see children do it. Like, seeing children do it and seeing how excited they are. And like even when…we were having all those conversations with [the professor]… of how they, like, again, they're in control and they just they're like, 'yeah, I did that. I'm a book author. I'm three years old and I just made a book.' You know? How powerful and how magical and how so, like, important that is. I definitely

> want to add that…I think really putting the storytelling and story acting and book making, book acting is just going to like just, I don't know, start a spark them and they could just really find their interest already in kindergarten. (Reyna, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 27, 2022)

Josie recalled the excitement she felt while getting to work with the children in the storytelling room, and her intentions of bringing this aspect of the workshop into her own future classroom.

> I wake up and I'm really excited to come to school. And my favorite thing has been, like, the storytelling and the book making, but I'm also an English minor, so that's like, yeah…I feel like it has me really excited… I feel like that one I would do at least, like, once or twice [a week] because, like, I feel like that one is the most beneficial in my eyes. (Josie, pre-service teacher, personal interview, June 16, 2022)

She went on to describe a stand-out moment for her in the storytelling room.

> I really like… them writing their own stories and, like, hearing them, and acting them out. I feel like that helps a lot with like plot development, character development and like understanding the emotions, like, characters are feeling. Or like when you're reading a book, you like ask questions…Like, when we were reading earlier today, we were asking them, like, what a *paleta* is, which is a popsicle, and they were all guessing. They were like, 'it's a plate.' And so it was like their involvement with the reading I feel…that, like boost[s] their literacy. (Josie, pre-service teacher, personal interview, June 16, 2022)

Jane, an in-service teacher, found storytelling to be a way to help her children learn about the writing process, and was eager to try it in her classroom.

> I wish I would have done it this year, had I known all of these things beforehand, and had the connections to let them create their own stories. Because I think a lot of what I found

> this last year in teaching was kids didn't know where to start. Like, whenever I would ask them to write a paper or whatever, because of testing, they would just look at me and be like, ‘I don't know,’ like, ‘I don't have any ideas’ or ‘I've never done anything’… and then, this summer, I got to literally see what I was trying to tell kids all year come to life and it's so, I cannot wait to sit down with my kids and be like, ‘okay, tell me a story.’ And I'm, like, writing it. And then I'm going to show them that and be like, ‘you just wrote a whole book. You literally just wrote this entire thing. You just wrote a whole paper.’ Like, I'm so excited to do that. I think that's going to be awesome! (Jane, personal interview, June 28, 2022)

Julie, an in-service teacher, also found practical takeaways in the storytelling/acting and book making aspects of the workshop.

> I think for sure I could use the storytelling. I know that's not necessarily like inquiry play. I think it's more of like the structured version of like literacy and play, but I could see myself using that all the time. Especially with like the acting and having kids being authors and the ownership and the writing identity and stuff like that…we always do performance tasks and writing, um, tasks and even making your own books. We've done billions of that, and now I kind of have like a…new mindset of it. We usually do them online because it's just like kind of what things have shifted to, using book creator online and stuff like that. I have a whole ‘nother, more ideas about how to do that now. (Julie, personal interview, June 17, 2022)

She went on to explain the enthusiasm for literacy she felt that room inspired in the children – specifically noting the drive and the motivation to write.

> If you say, ‘do you want to write a story?’ of them being, like, ‘yes!’ and then actually doing it, drawing pictures, or using ribbon to connect to their book, hearing other people's books then being like, ‘ooh,’ and then going back to theirs. And, um, it's like the drive almost, or like the motivation of it actually being fun. (Julie, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 17, 2022)

Clara, a pre-service teacher, also connected with the storytelling aspects of the workshop.

> I think for literacy and writing that really came into play in the storytelling room. I was just in the storytelling room this week, and I was in there twice, and it was cool to see like the concepts kids have come up with. And then after class in our group, we would let them share their stories and act out their stories. And it was super cool. (Clara, personal interview, June 30, 2022)

Storytelling and acting, it seemed, was a tangible way for the teachers to implement play in their classroom. Next, I sought to determine if there were other aspects of the program that the teachers felt they could take with them.

Practical Takeaways – Constructive Play and Inquiry

There were other aspects of the program, constructive play and inquiry, in particular, that teachers felt could be easily applied in their classroom – some fully embracing the un-structuredness, others taking *pieces* of what they learned and using it in the classroom. Anne, an in-service teacher, classifying more with the latter group.

> I think that it's definitely something that I'm going to take with me and try to incorporate more. Like, I've already started talking with my team…about maybe instead of having it just to go like to do your work in a different space, having some open ended materials out there, and once you're done, you can go explore these materials and see what you can

> learn; or, can you connect that back to our learning? So I want to take it with me and I've already got like plans and ideas. It's just going to see what I can fit in the classroom and what I'm comfortable with, and then every year keep growing on that. But I don't want to lose what I've learned here. (Anne, personal interview, June 30, 2022)

She went on to explain the love she had for the block room, and the learning she witnessed during her time there.

> …The students were figuring out like algorithms and they're trying to see how many different things they could bounce a ping pong ball off of and then land in a box. And they were doing physics - like ramps. And what ramp would make the car go faster if the ramp was up higher or lower? I mean, those things, it just seems like if you give the kids the materials like… it was blocks…I was, I don't know, you'd build a house, like, right? Like that's what I thought I was going to walk into. They're going to be building things. But then they found these pieces of wood, and a car, and, of course… a piece of wood and a car. They were like, 'Let's make a ramp.' (Anne, personal interview, June 30, 2022)

Reyna, too, found great value in the constructive play space of the workshop, especially in the use of open-ended recyclables and the creativity she observed with the children.

> It teaches them, you know, like so many things about recycling, there's so many things that, you know, we can use these materials as a cheap way to, you know… they can build and use their imagination, which, again, is like, I don't, I didn't recognize that my little students had fairly, like, you know, almost little imagination. Like, I would tell them, like, you know, 'draw whatever.' And they're like, 'I don't know what to draw, like, what do I… what do I do?' It it's just even cultivating that and like, you know, supporting that.

> And them. I think that's truly, actually important… Like this is giving me every outlet to just know what I can do. (Reyna, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 27, 2022)

She went on to explain the experimentation she observed in other areas of the program that made an impact on her.

> Just, I love the experiment of it of just like…you know, 'I want to feel paint on my hands' or 'I want to like see what's going to happen when I build things' or 'when I put things together' [or] 'when I run fast or trip,' you know?... Any of those things with water and the earthworms. Oh, my goodness. I love the experimentation. [It's] like, 'I'm going to try this out. I'm going to see what happens. And, you know, whatever happens, I'll.. I'll learn. And now I know.' (Reyna, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 27, 2022)

Though Jane, an in-service teacher, struggled to see how woodworking might work in the classroom, she found great value in the experience, and was willing, personally, to embrace it.

> I was a little nervous, but I think I also just needed to do what the kids do. And I needed to remind myself, like, if…something *does* happen, like, I'll be fine. Um, and I think it helped. I actually had a girl that I was working with in woodworking hit her finger pretty hard, and it was the only kid that we had even cry a whole day. Like, everyone else was fine. A lot of them whack themselves and like go 'oh' and they just keep going…And I asked her if it was scary and she said, 'yeah, it was more just scary.' And I mean, five minutes later, like she was smiling. She asked me for the hammer back and she went back to it. And so I think my nervousness about it went away, watching the fact that, like, they're okay, you know what I mean? Like, so I think I've gotten better. I think woodworking really helped. The cooking situation was very nerve wracking, but I know that they can use that stuff. I know they can use knives and all kinds of things. And so I

> think woodworking actually helped me. And I think… I don't know, I liked woodworking. I would go back out and do it again… if I was able to and I was allowed to at my school. I would definitely do woodworking with kids. (Jane, personal interview, June 28)

She went on to explain the explicit learning that she observed as she watched the children in woodworking.

> I feel like in woodworking - one, they're getting to like pull from their real life experiences. So I think it helps them remember it better. But also, I mean, I've seen them build shapes, I've seen them talk about shapes. I've seen kids realize that the length of what they have, like maybe one piece of wood was too long. And so they talk about… they're like, 'this is too long; it doesn't fit; it's longer than this one.' And they're comparing sizes and shapes. And I mean, that's what we are looking for whenever they're at that age anyway in mathematics. And so I feel easily it connects and they're getting to do all this work with their hands and actually manipulate it. And so I feel like it's going to stay better than it would if I were just to be like, 'this is a triangle.' (Jane, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 28, 2022)

Julie spoke of the learning she witnessed as children played through inquiry, and the importance of child-directed learning that she observed.

> I think seeing the kids working together outside, even like the feel of a worm, like, some kids have never felt that before. And so I, I could stand at the front of the classroom all day being like, you know, 'worms are really slimy.' Like, I could say that all day long. But until they actually felt it, that they would have never conceptualized that or actually understood that So that's just one example. But yeah, I definitely think kids need the day

> to teach themselves more, especially at the younger ages… because it's like their first time doing things ever. (Julie, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 17, 2022)

Clara also found value in the constructive play and inquiry aspects of the program, noting life-lessons she observed as the children played with living creatures.

> …when we brought in the worms…to the science [area] it was pretty chaotic, but it was really cool to be able to like teach the kids, like, 'these are living things.' Like, 'this is what they need; we can't drown them in water or they probably won't survive.' (Clara, pre-service teacher, personal interview, June 30, 2022)

She went on to express her initial reservations about woodworking, and how her perspective changed through her experience working directly with the children in that area.

> I was so scared when I first went into woodworking, but it was just amazing to see what the kids were able to do. Like, making sure all the beams were the same height so that they could build a table. Or even the kids would tell me, like, 'watch your fingers; I'm scared I'm gonna hit your fingers.' And stuff like that. And it was, just, it was so cool to see what they were capable of. It was just stuff that I couldn't even fathom doing…it was awesome. (Clara, pre-service teacher, personal interview, June 30, 2022)

It was clear, after having the chance to talk with the teachers, that they were pulling practical strategies from the workshop that they could take with them into their classrooms.

Aspects That Presented Challenges

Hesitancy and a Need for Support

While there were many teachers who expressed interest in certain aspects of the program that they would be able to use in the classroom, many were hesitant about being able to incorporate other aspects. These activities, they thought, worked well for the workshop, but

would not realistically work in their own classroom – whether for personal reasons and/or reservations, administrative policies, or even the ability to oversee/supervise large numbers of children to one teacher. Woodworking and cooking, especially, seemed to present elements of risk that would not be permissible in a public school classroom, both for personal reasons, as well as reasons related to policies that govern public schools.

One in-service teacher expressed supervision concerns a need for support to be able to successfully implement those aspects of play into her classroom.

> I would just need a bigger support system, like, a lot of them, Boxville and constructive play and blocks, I can incorporate those even if the rest of my team thinks that I'm crazy and does not want to, you know, be a part of this. I can incorporate those things in my classroom without them. But with woodworking and cooking, I really think that I would need a bigger support system for that. I mean, just…where we would even do that? Like, I'm just like thinking, like, where I could have nails laying around for my kids, you know? So with those two rooms in particular, that's a lot of supplies and it's a lot of space that we would need. Like we don't have microwaves anywhere near us, you know? So that would take a lot more planning. (Anne, personal interview, June 30, 2022)

She went on to explain that although there may be challenges with those aspects of play, she would be open to it, personally, if she were able to find the support. She spoke of the things she learned while working with the children in those areas of the workshop.

> I mean, as long as we had smaller nails and hammers, I mean, the students did great with it, like the things that they were able to build. And I was worried because this one little girl, she was like, 'Can you hold the nail while I hit it?' And I was like, 'No, you're going to hit my finger. No.' And so she tried it. She wasn't able to like do it by herself. And

> they asked her if she wanted me to get it started for her and then she could finish it. So I get it started for her. And what do I end of doing? Hitting myself, because I missed the nail and I hit myself in the thumb. So I, again, don't give children enough credit. I probably should have let her do it because then I probably wouldn't have hurt as much as if she whacked me. The students can do it. I just need to find the space for it. I need to find materials and who can support me. And in finding this, and if people can bring things from home that are left over… like…just a little logistics would need to happen, but I could definitely incorporate it. (Anne, personal interview, June 30, 2022)

Lauren, too, had reservations about the woodworking area.

> I was so nervous at first because I think these children are going to break themselves. They're so careful, like…If they're not being careful, they quickly hit themselves and they're like, okay, no more. I need to be careful now. I was very shocked. (Lauren, pre-service teacher, personal interview, June 27, 2022)

Though, she explains, through her experience in the workshop, she grew to see its value in education, becoming more willing to embrace it in the classroom.

> I think that I'm definitely more willing to try now. I don't know exactly where I would incorporate it, but I would be way more willing now than I would be before. So I think that's a good sign of growth… I think having that creative freedom to make whatever is still there, like a lot of people, they started out making houses. Now people are walking out of here with tables and chairs, like, it is…crazy, amazing. So I think that also being open ended, sometimes they have to cross boundaries that they are constantly like, 'oh, this is not possible to make.' So yeah, it takes time. But I think that, yeah, eventually it works. (Lauren, pre-service teacher, personal interview, June 27, 2022)

Jane, an in-service teacher, had reservations about the woodworking space, as well.

> Woodworking, I think is the biggest one where I'm like, ‘that would be hard to bring into a classroom,’ but if you're at a really awesome school that, like, supports that and lets you, that would be really cool to see if like principals or specials teachers were okay with having, you know, wood out for a day and like hammers and tools. And I just think it becomes a little bit different when it's in a school. It definitely depends on what school you're in and who's in charge, if that's going to be okay. Because I know some of the stuff…people that I work…they'd be very scared of, like especially woodworking. So I think it is realistic. I think some of the aspects might be a little bit more challenging to like actually implement unless your whole school is on board. (Jane, personal interview, June 28, 2022)

Constructive play, while embraced by most, was also an area of concern for some teachers. One in-service teacher described the anxiety, in the lack of structure, that often accompanied the constructive play space.

> There are certain parts of [learning through play]… because I'm like a type A person that like the constructive playroom… that gave me anxiety…We were in there and it's not that I’m taking the value away from the play because I saw the learning and the excitement and the engagement that the students were having. But as a teacher, I cannot imagine incorporating constructive play, like, into my classroom, because I think that I would just be stressed all the time and there's so much mess and… It was just a lot for me…Like as someone who hasn't done it before. I don't think I could just go full force. I would be stressed. (Anne, personal interview, June 30, 2022)

Though Reyna, an in-service teacher, had not worked in the woodworking area at the time of her interview, she expressed concerns over safety, and also the practical aspects of implementing it into the classroom.

> I haven't been in [woodworking]. It scares me. That's why most of, like, eh, sharp things… little children… they just wanna cut things. I'm like, that's a little more scary to me. I mean, I'm definitely so excited to see that and to see, like, you know, what they can do. And I know, like… again, I've seen them make tables and make extraordinary things, but I'm like, 'oh my gosh.' Like, I can't even do that. So I think that like, again, like just tiptoeing into it and maybe that's something I can ease into… I really wouldn't know realistically how to do that unless I would… I'd have to really, like, think, 'okay, how could we do woodworking in the classroom?' (Reyna, personal interview, June 27, 2022)

She went on to talk about her hesitancy, referring to liability on her part if a child were to be hurt.

> I think to me, like, I'm like, okay, well, my back is turned and anything is happening. *Anything is happening*… and…really, like, they go home. And who are the parents mad at? You know? Not the kid. Not the other kid. You know? Me. And it's like, I'm like, well, they, you know, they had that choice… they were… you know, doing that. They're experimenting with that. But then it's like, oh, like, am I really ready for that battle of like, yeah, I let them use the saw in the classroom. Like, what about it? (Reyna, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 27, 2022)

Josie, a pre-service teacher, shared similar reservations about woodworking and cooking, and questioned whether those areas were meeting curricular standards or were simply exposing children to elements of risk.

> Like, woodworking and the cooking is where I get a little skeptical about it because I don't think there's a lot of play involved in that. They're more like, well, maybe the woodworking, but the cooking, especially, I feel like there's not really play and that it's more like they're learning, you know, 'a stove is hot; don't touch it' type skills. Like, yeah, I don't really know where play like is involved in that. I think it's great that we're doing it, but I don't know where it's involved there. (Josie, personal interview, June 16, 2022)

She went on to compare those areas to other areas of the workshop – areas, that she personally felt, would be more appropriate in a classroom setting (admitting that she had not spent time yet in cooking or woodworking).

> I've only done the science, the storytelling and the book making, and art, so I feel like those are a lot of, like, really based in, like, education subjects. And so maybe that's why there's a disconnect for me, for, like, the cooking and the woodworking, because that's not really something in, like, normal… regular education…So there's just a disconnect with that. (Josie, pre-service teacher, personal interview, June 16, 2022)

While the teachers varied in the aspects of the workshop that they were willing to embrace, overall, it seemed that all teachers were feeling pushed more *towards* a play-based pedagogy, some even willing to advocate for it in the classroom.

A Push Toward Play

Willing and Equipped to Advocate

Another theme that emerged in the interview data was this idea of becoming an *advocate* for play. While teachers varied in their perceptions of play, and even in their intended use of

play, many participants who were interviewed expressed ideas of advocacy – a willingness to fight for play, and a necessity to, as they believed it to be undervalued in education.

One in-service teacher expressed the need for advocacy in the classroom, and her own willingness to stand up for it.

> So what value does play have in education today? I don't think very much… From what I've seen and what I've heard is that everyone keeps asking for more play and the opportunity to include play in their classroom. But if they keep advocating for it, that's telling me that they're not getting enough of it. And so I don't think that play [is] in education as much as it should be… but I think like starting slow and getting team members on board and things like that can help us progress to what we're seeing in the play and inquiry workshop, but it would take a little bit of time to get there… I know that if… if I went and I said, this is the research, this is what I've learned, and this is what I'm doing, I would have full support. (Anne, personal interview, June 30, 2022)

She explained her overall push toward a play-based pedagogy, given her experience in the summer workshop, and how she will use what she has learned to transform her own classroom, gradually, but intentionally.

> So I don't have it all figured out. It's a slow approach, but just making sure that I give students the opportunity to play because right now they don't… unless they go outside for outdoor play, that's their only opportunity that they have in my classroom to play. So giving them the opportunity, the time, the materials, and seeing what they can learn on their own and then trying to incorporate what they've already learned and put it in my lessons… I originally would have thought, like, my second graders, like they don't want to do, you know, they don't want to do this. But we have eight-year-olds in this that have

> *thrived* and that love going to the different rooms and have experienced and made so many different connections that I want to try to incorporate it in my classroom. So it's definitely pushed me closer to the play-based and how it can be used in grade levels …that aren't just like the pre-K…and kindergarten. Like I think it can be used in all the different grade levels. (Anne, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 30, 2022)

Another in-service teacher expressed ideas of advocacy, and feeling equipped to stand up for play in his own school.

> I feel like I can back it up. Like, I could tell you every reason why it's valuable. I could write a whole paper, like, and do a presentation on the importance of…utilizing [play] in the classroom… with all ages…in some capacity. But it's…been challenging mentally to like fit both things together. (Arlo, personal interview, June 17, 2022)

A pre-service teacher, too, expressed both a need for advocacy and a willingness to advocate for play in her classroom.

> I think that if I explained my background and that I've done this before and that I have been part of research for this, I think that they may be more willing to listen to my thoughts on the topic. I think I want to… Even after just, I know that we still have some time this week, but I feel like I still find myself changing… I would have to advocate, but I think that I could win my argument. (Lauren, personal interview, June 27, 2022)

Lila, too, expressed feelings of advocacy toward play and a willingness to stand up for it, especially after having experienced the workshop firsthand.

> Like last year I would not have known how to go to my principal and be like, 'please let…my kids play.' But now I'm like, I can, you know, talk to them…I can say, and like give my reasons why. And I think they would buy into it because ultimately it's making

> my administration buy into it to let me do it because they don't want to. And if I'm just having the kids like play and create, I'm going to get questioned… But now, I'm like, I can talk to them. I can give my reasons why and like really set it up because, I mean, that's what I want to do. I want to have a time, like, every day somehow, for my kids to do it. (Lila, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 15, 2022)

Reyna, an in-service teacher, also felt that through this experience, she has become better equipped to advocate for play in her classroom.

> I think in this experience. I definitely want to fight for it more in my classroom or just like put my foot down and saying like, 'no, this is why they need play so much and this is why it's important and this is how they grow from it and learn from it.' Just really starting to incorporate it and say, 'yes, curriculum is very, very important to kids.' You know, they need to learn that stuff. But there's so much like magical, amazing things that they can learn through play that needs to be in the classroom. So I think that's really, really important after this experience. (Reyna, personal interview, June 27, 2022)

She went on to explain how she hoped to use that knowledge and experience to transform her own classroom.

> Now I can, like, reference this experience and say…this….stuff is just so, like, important to children of just their lives and even of growth mindset. Like if they, you know, try something and they can't do it yet, they keep practicing it, keep trying it, and just giving them that opportunity to do that…I want to incorporate this…How can I? and tell people how to incorporate this? But I do. I think it's just so important. And now I'm like going to fight for it. Yeah, this is now like, 'this is how it's going to be in my classroom.' Like, 'if

you don't like it, fine. But like, look at all the benefits that they get from it.' (Reyna, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 27, 2022)

Jane, another first year teacher, expressed a push toward play in her own classroom.

> …I'm hoping because of this summer to hold on to that and be able to bring some of these cool ideas into the classroom and then bring the standards… I think that's pushed me more towards, I think, proved that [play] works. And I think being able to just see how much fun the kids had, too, and like enjoying coming to school at the end of the day, like that's my biggest thing. I just want kids to like coming to school. And so this definitely made me want to do this this next year. Yeah, I'm completely sold. I want to do it. (Jane, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 28, 2022)

She went on to speak of her willingness to advocate for it.

> I feel like…as much as you might want to say that you're *all for it* before you see it. I feel like being here and actually getting to work the summer program helped me a lot… feel as if I have more of a right to talk about it, too, and just have more of a voice for it. And so I feel like I could definitely back it up if someone were to try to like, argue on this [being] really important or not. (Jane, personal interview, June 28, 2022)

Clara, a pre-service teacher, also spoke of her willingness to advocate for play – feeling equipped, and also willing to continue learning and growing in this area, to be better able to speak to its value in education.

> I think I would have to do a little bit of my own research just to be able to bring facts to the table and say, this is why this is a good thing. On just like a personal level, I would be able to fight for it, just to share my own experiences. But sometimes that's just not really enough for people…I think it'd be something I'd have to fight for, and I would be willing

> to fight for it. Just seeing other people's experiences or even just people I've talked to about this, they were like, ‘oh, that sounds crazy.’ Like, ‘that sounds really chaotic or sounds really hectic.’ And…I think a lot of people don't think that students are able to learn in a hectic environment or a chaotic environment. But I mean, the kids here have proven that to be wrong and that they are more than capable of learning many things while also being chaotic. (Clara, personal interview, June 30, 2022)

These teachers, feeling pushed more towards play, and even willing to advocate for it, also expressed how their own pedagogies were changing as a result of this practicum experience.

Shifts in Teacher Role and Pedagogy

These same teachers shared similar thoughts on how they believed young children learned best – many of them believing in the power of inquiry (child-discovery over direct teaching), and seeing their own shift from the role of *teacher as a director* to those of *teacher as a facilitator* or *teacher as an observer.*

One in-service teacher expressed the importance of stepping back and letting the children take the lead in their own learning.

> I think the value in play-based learning is that it can really be student led. So it's what the students are observing and those connections that they're making, they're actually going to like keep and those are going to stick with them versus something that I tell them… They're not going to remember that. But if they find it out for themselves, they will. So I think a play-based curriculum is really more student driven and more fluid, and you can really get what the students need at that time… With play-based learning, it's more like fluid, like you can find what the students are observing and turn that into a lesson. (Anne, personal interview, June 30, 2022)

She went on to explain her shift in pedagogy, seeing herself now more as a facilitator and observer.

> So I've always *seen* myself as a facilitator of learning, but being in the play and inquiry workshop, I realized that I haven't been as much of a facilitator as I thought that I was. But I mean, in play and inquiry workshop, it's all facilitation. So it's…'these are the materials. What are you going to do with them?' And then being an observer and just interjecting whenever I see that I can make it a teachable moment, or if there's something that they're not understanding, then I can clarify for them. So this is definitely more of a facilitator role than I've ever experienced. (Anne, personal interview, June 30, 2022)

Arlo, too, spoke of his shift toward more of a facilitator role, rather than a direct teacher.

> I feel like I'm more of a facilitator. I'm like really hands on. I personally don't like to, like, do much of the talking. I like to pose a question or give them an opportunity to like put their hands on real things… just by being a facilitator and giving them opportunities to, like, teach each other, that's the most impactful… It's less teacher focused…It's really not about me, and it makes my job - it shifts the role to an observer and facilitator. (Arlo, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 17, 2022)

Lauren, a pre-service teacher, shared similar views on her role in the classroom – listening to the children, following their interests, and allowing them to discover on their own.

> I think for the most part, you're the observer or the listener, because whatever happens, you know, you could plan this whole thought out lesson. But if your kids are like not getting it, then it comes down to, 'okay, you need to listen to this and then figure out what to do better next time.' Or 'you need to listen to what is important to them in the first place and then try to find things off of that because it will make the lesson go

> through so much better, especially if you do the play with the curriculum… I think they'll remember it better if [the children] are doing it on their own… I think that it you learn better off of your own research and your own inquiry. (Lauren, personal interview, June 27, 2022)

Another teacher shared her beliefs surrounding play and the benefits of child-directed learning.

> I think play is really cool because it helps, like, the kids are really interested and they have like freedom to think on their own and like create and learn things again, like on their own instead of just me…teaching them and saying, 'do this and this and this.' And then you're supposed to know this. Instead they get to like figure it out on their own. (Lila, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 15, 2022)

She went on to express her thoughts on standards-based curriculum and play-based curriculum, and how she personally feels young children learn best.

> Whenever…you give a teacher a standard, you tell a child, like, 'all right, you're going to learn this today.' How do I know that they're going to learn that? Like, how can I ensure like they're going to learn it because maybe they're not ready to learn or
>
> Like…why would I teach like that? Um, so with play. It's more like open, like they can tell me what they're learning by what they're doing, and, like, they're going at their own pace, they're using their imagination, they're creating, like, they're doing their theory building, like they're building on what they know to make a new idea and then I can, again, like, stretch that idea and, like, stretch their learning. But I'm not telling them, like, you're learning this today. And I think that's how they should learn. (Lila, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 15, 2022)

She shared similar shifts in her approach, especially when compared to her experience as a first-year teacher, noting specifically her shift away from the role of *teacher as director.*

> It's hard because, like, this year my role was very like telling them like what we need to do and how we're going to do. And I feel like I was directing them way too much. Like I was exhausted. I was like, this is a lot…I felt like I never stopped talking because like my principal had very strict expectations when he came in classroom. He'd be like 'I want to see this, this and this.' And so…I gave like very like step-by-step directions. I felt like I never stopped giving directions. And that is not what I want to see. (Lila, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 15, 2022)

She went on to explain the impact of the practicum experience on her approach to the classroom, the role she takes on, and her pedagogy.

> I want to be able to just like…I'm doing here. Walking around, asking them questions, because I want to help their learning. I want to see what they're learning, but I don't want to be the one just like teaching, teaching, teaching. I want them to, like, learn on their own because I know like, personally, I learn much better whenever I am doing something and I figure it out… So I want to be more of just like, I don't want to just like stand there, but I just want to observe them, I guess, and then like question their learning and like, see what they're doing. (Lila, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 15, 2022)

Reyna also noted shifts in her own thinking in regard to teacher and student roles.

> I think with like the play-based curriculum, again, it's giving the children, you know, it's giving the students the freedom, the choice, like, truly, that they can just, again, like be in charge of their learning. I think that's just so important because…again, I didn't see my students take charge of their learning. They depended on me. They're like, 'okay, give us

> the curriculum, give us what we're going to learn'… like we both need to be in control, but also like, yeah, you have to be… you're both learning… I think it's, like, children just learn by doing it. It's like I can talk and talk and talk, but they just truly learn by doing. And remember it by doing. (Reyna, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 27, 2022)

She went on to compare her first year of teaching to the experience she gained at the workshop, and how she plans to approach the classroom with this new mindset.

> I feel like my role last year was definitely, I was like, 'okay, I'm the teacher.' Like, I have to, you know, tell them what to do and how to do things and did that. But going into next year, I really plan on, again, like, just okay, like… just put some choice in there… And I think that gets them so excited to learn, as well. They're like, 'oh, like, she's letting me like choose.' Like, 'I'm really part of this classroom community.' Like, 'I'm important in the school and, like, my opinion matters.' And I think that was so important to them of just like, you know, 'oh, she's not here to just tell me what to do and force me to do things.' Like, 'she's, you know, she loves me and, like, she wants me to do good things and I get to, you know, collaborate with this person and just learn from them.' Instead of just like, you know telling them what to do (Reyna, personal interview, June 27, 2022).

Josie, a pre-service teacher, noted how her own perceptions of play were shifting. While not fully embracing every aspect of play, she found herself pushed more in that direction.

> I feel like at first I didn't really think play had a place in education, but also I wasn't really learning a lot about, like, early education. But I feel now that, since I've been working with younger students and stuff, I feel like play is really important. It helps with a lot of like their motor skills, their like, cognitive skills. And now I feel like I would consider implementing that into, like, my future classroom, depending on, like, what grade level.

> But even if it is an older grade level, I feel like the engagement is a lot higher with play involved because it's something that they're already like wanting to do and interested in. So I guess that's kind of how it shifted - that I didn't think there was a place and now I feel like there's a small place for it. (Josie, personal interview, June 16, 2022)

She went on to explain how the readings and workshop, specifically, were helpful in her overall shift in understanding.

> …at first, I was really turned off by [play]. I didn't like the play-based at all. because in my mind, we're like, when I was growing up and, like, all the classes I've been in. And it was all, like, curriculum based only, and it was like there was no time for play. Like, maybe you had a field day, but, like, that's really it. And so, like, in my eyes, I was like, 'oh, so that's what teaching is like,' is just facilitating and, like, assessing, which I didn't really like either, but I was like, 'I guess I'll have to do it.' But after, like, doing all the readings and workshopping with the kids, I like now realize it is really important because they are still kids. And so, like, if you can implement, like learning into something that they're already doing, which is playing, like, they're having fun and they're learning, that's like the best combination ever. So I feel like it has towards me, like, pushed me towards it. (Josie, pre-service teacher, personal interview, June 16, 2022)

Another first year teacher shared how her own perceptions toward play were shifting – noting, specifically, her value of play, and the learning that she feels is directly connected to it.

> I think play has value in education because I think kids should have the freedom to kind of pick and choose what they do. I know in a sense that we, as teachers, need to structure it. But I see whenever kids actually care about what they're doing and they're having fun, they seem to learn a lot more. And so play a lot of the time has a very negative

> connotation, I feel like, with teachers, but it's not like they're just running around not doing anything…They figure it out and they make the real world connections. And so I feel like when they're able to make natural connections, it sticks better, too. And so for me, this has shifted my perspective just because I've only ever taught older grades. And I'm really wanting to figure out ways to include this with fifth graders, because play changes as you get older, I think. And so it might be a little bit different than what we see here in like a preschool, but there's still the ways to do that. And I think it would help my kids make better connections. Yeah, so I'm liking it. (Jane, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 28, 2022)

She went on to express the importance of autonomy in learning and how that is supported through play.

> I think standards are really important and I think sitting down and reading through things and working things out in the classroom and all that stuff is definitely important. But if they can do it through play, why not let them? - is kind of my take. I think kids learn better when they're able to have a say in it… it's kind of cool to get to see kids not even know that they're learning, but they are…I personally think if you're able to let kids play and be kind of in charge of that aspect, I think they're going to learn more. I mean, than they would if you just sat them down and ask them questions…I think because it comes more naturally…and I think it's going to stand out more to them rather than me just reading them something and saying, this is this answer and this is why…whereas if they get to naturally discover something, they did it. So it sticks, I feel like, better in their own heads. (Jane, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 28, 2022)

Julie, a fifth grade teacher, shared how her own perceptions of play were changing – starting with very little value of play, but growing to see how it could be used practically with her own children.

> So I teach fifth grade right now and I will continue teaching fifth grade. And so I don't think I had a big value on play because like kids have kind of, in my opinion, in my classroom, they passed that part of their life where they need to get that energy out and they need to have that kind of collaboration with one another. A lot. And so I think this experience has definitely opened my eyes to certain situations that I could use with my classroom, especially with the storytelling and story acting and writing curriculum and even social studies, like getting to act out things. And so I can see it changing and finding different ways to do things, especially like student-based inquiry. (Julie, in-service teacher, personal interview, June 17, 2022)

Despite already being a classroom teacher, this was her first exposure to play-based learning. And while she does not embrace it fully, she feels pushed more in a play-based direction after having gone through this experience.

> …this has been like the first experience I've ever had with specific play-based inquiry curriculum… I think in ways I can see it really working in my classroom. And then I also see it being, like, I could never do that with my subjects or my age group or whatever. So I'm kind of like in the middle because I could honestly really see it. Like, especially with the creativity and the writing and reading. I think if I had, if I were teaching science and math, I could I could see it in a lot of different ways…I think…comparing [curriculum learning] to play-based learning is a huge difference. I think play-based learning is

> definitely the way kids need to learn, especially in ECE and younger grades…very play-based would be the best for them. (Julie, personal interview, June 17, 2022)

She went on to explain how her shifts in understanding would impact her approach in the classroom, specifically in the teacher role she would take on.

> I feel like next year is going to be so different for me to be comfortable to try those things…right now I can only see myself as the facilitator, just because of last year. So I'm excited to kind of be the standby person. (Julie, personal interview, June 17, 2022)

Clara, a pre-service teacher, also shared how her perceptions of play were being shaped throughout the summer workshop.

> I honestly think that play is super important in the classroom and I think it helps children developmentally. And I also think one of the biggest things that has to do with play is just socializing with others…And I liked how we implemented this. There are some things that I would change in my classroom, personally, to make it more just organized, but I think it was awesome just to see the kids interacting with everyone and also interacting with us. And I honestly think this…just changed my perspective on play as a whole… (Clara, personal interview, June 30, 2022)

As she reflected on the learning that occurred as she watched the children play together, she shared that she felt the children were "…sharing experiences. And a lot of the kids [were] teaching other kids… they're reflecting on past experiences and past ideas and they're sharing it with others" (Clara, personal interview, June 30, 2022). She went on to express how valuable she found child-directed learning to be.

> …I think it's great when students are able to come to their own conclusions and make their own connections and learn the way that they want to learn. And just this whole

> experience. I've had so many kids, like, teaching me stuff that they've learned themselves, and I think that's really cool and really special. And I think it was just this whole thing. It's just been so cool. (Clara, pre-service teacher, personal interview, June 30, 2022)

She also spoke to how this experience would transform her approach to her future classroom.

> My main thing that I've taken from this is giving the kids the option to choose what they want to do. And I think in my future classroom, I personally see myself like setting up different stations and letting the kids choose what they want to do. Like, if they want to build with blocks, they can build with blocks. Like, if they want to make a book, they can make a book… and I think it's really helped them build confidence and also just do what they enjoy doing… and just seeing the kids' faces and how their faces light up when they create something. It's just so different from, like I said, sticking a worksheet in front of a kid…just seeing how happy it makes them and how proud they are of their work has definitely pushed me more towards like a play-based inquiry. (Clara, pre-service teacher, personal interview, June 30, 2022)

Overall, it seemed that teachers were shifting more toward a play-based pedagogy – some embracing it fully, while others took tangible pieces of it to use in their classrooms.

Summary

These stories, each as unique as the individuals who shared them, helped to shape my understanding of their practicum experience - how their perceptions of play were shifting, and how those shifts would impact their teaching philosophy and pedagogy. By electing a mixed-methods approach, we are better able to understand the complexity of the phenomenon (Greene, 2007). By coupling survey responses and field observations, and using in depth interviews to bridge the gaps in my own understanding, I am better able to represent the phenomenon

holistically. While teachers' overall perceptions of the theoretical aspects of play seemed to be positive, there were slight reservations about the practical aspects of play in the classroom. Barriers, both personally and professionally, seemed to exist for most teachers. And while many aspects of the play and inquiry workshop seemed to be embraced, there were elements that posed challenges for some. Though varying to the extent on how they would implement play in their own classrooms, all interviewed participants reported a push *toward* a play-based pedagogy following the practicum experience, with many identifying now as *advocates* for play. A detailed summary of the findings will open the next chapter.

Discussion

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to look at how the perceptions of pre- and in-service teachers changed regarding play and storytelling after participating in a play and inquiry practicum. It was believed that by changing teachers' perceptions surrounding play, we might create better classrooms for our children; teachers may become better informed on developmentally appropriate practices, more intentional in their approach, and, ultimately, provide better outcomes for their children (Hunkin, 2014; Wohlwend & Peppler, 2015). In an attempt to investigate this connection, the study aimed to explore the following research questions:

1. How are the perceptions of pre- and in-service early childhood teachers regarding play and storytelling influenced as a result of participation in a play and inquiry practicum?
2. How does this change of pre- and in-service early childhood teachers' perceptions regarding play and storytelling shift their teaching philosophy and/or intended practices as a result of this participation?

The study examined the experiences of 27 teachers, each with a story as unique as the person they grew to become. I followed them, intentionally, over the course of our summer together – learning from each other and growing together as teachers, and as *researchers.* Our experience together was documented through our interactions with the children, our discussions with colleagues, our questions, our reservations, our *aha* moments.

Key Findings

In an effort to understand, holistically, how the teachers were growing and changing throughout our time together, a triangulation of methods were employed. Daily interactions and

conversations were documented, chronologically, to reflect change in perception over time. Quantitative analyses were run at three different points in time, to capture, analytically, any growth or regression the teachers were reporting. Finally, in-depth interviews were conducted in an effort to bridge any gaps between survey responses and day-to-day observations, drawing themes directly from the participants' responses. These methods provided a convergence of evidence (Saldana, 2015) and helped to better inform my understanding of the teachers' perceptions of play, and how those perceptions changed throughout the practicum experience.

The teachers, overall, reported a philosophical awakening, following the week of readings (Pre-Survey Composite = 1,565). For most, a slight reservation about the practical aspects of play, following the intensive week of teacher preparation work (Post 1 Composite = 1,487). Finally, a better understanding of play, theoretically *and* practically, following the three week play and inquiry workshop with the community children (Post 2 Composite = 1,513). Overall, from Pre-Survey to Post 1 there was a 78 point decrease of statistical significance (p = .007; following intensive teacher preparation week); from Post 1 to Post 2 there was a 26 point increase, though not statistically significant (p = .363; following three week workshop with children); and from Pre-Survey to Post 2 there was a 52 point decrease, though not of statistical significance (p = .128; overall summer practicum). In addition, there was a significant increase (p = .023) in *the role of play as learning*, following the three week play and inquiry workshop portion of the practicum, leading us to believe that the experience working directly with the children helped to alleviate confusion around play-based learning, and helped teachers to see the power of a play-based curriculum over a standards-based curriculum. While varying in degrees on how they would implement play in their own classrooms, all interviewed participants reported a push *toward* a play-based pedagogy following the practicum experience, many identifying as

advocates for play. One participant, in particular, speaking personally to the impact of the workshop on her own professional journey.

> I've just really been questioning my career for the past couple of years, and I didn't really know if this is what I wanted to do. Just with everything that's been going on. And I have so many teachers in my life that have been quitting this past year, and it's really…it's really been discouraging, honestly. But being here and working with these kids makes me realize, like, *why* I'm doing what I'm doing and… it's… I'm gonna get emotional. But it made me realize, like, how much I love working with kids and why I chose to do this, because I always wanted to be a teacher…I'm super thankful for this whole experience. For me, it was like the first week after we were with the kids, I, like, came home and I, like, sat down and I was like, 'this is what I want to do - *this is what I want to do*; I want to be with these kids; I want to be a positive interaction in their life' (Clara, pre-service teacher, personal interview, June 30, 2022).

There is *power* in practicum experiences that push us to become the best teachers we can be – to cause us to think critically, to reflect, to reform, to *create change*. These teachers' stories are a testament to that. The findings from this study align with other work surrounding teacher perceptions of play and how those perceptions are influenced throughout their teacher preparation work and practicum experiences (Hegde et al., 2014; Keung & Cheung, 2019; Leggett, 2017; Leggett & Newman, 2017; McFarland & Laird, 2018; Shank, 2016; Sherwood & Reifel, 2010; Van der Aalsvoort et al., 2015; Jung & Jin, 2014/2015). However, there were also noted gaps in the literature. The complexity of barriers, the practicality of play, and the impacts of a worldwide pandemic on play would be considered gaps in the existing research surrounding

teachers' perceptions of play, and would need to be explored further. All of these aspects will be discussed in this chapter.

Implications

It is critical in the understanding of this research to first recognize champions of play as social constructivists; in such a construct, "…individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work" (Creswell and Poth, 2018, p. 24). In this realm of thought, researchers derive meanings based on their personal experiences, focus on a multitude of views, a *complexity* of views, rather than a narrowed lens in which to study; they rely heavily on the participants' views of the phenomenon, and negotiate these meanings through a shared process as a participatory observer. From this, theories are inductively developed throughout the process of research; connections are made, patterns are drawn, and meaning is interpreted.

Barriers

A major theme that emerged throughout this study was surrounding the issue of barriers, whether warranted or not. Participants discussed barriers that did not seem to exist within the workshop, but were, for them, a reality as a public school teacher. Many teachers expressed that they aligned with the theory of play, and were willing to use it in their classrooms, but felt that it would not be embraced by their administrations – leaving them with personal and professional reservations about its use in the classroom. The implications of this may mean that many teachers, though feeling pushed more toward a play-based pedagogy, may choose to align with curriculum-based methods in an effort to appease their superiors. Are there ways we can resolve this tension?

For one, it may be prudent, during the intensive week of teacher preparation work, for professors to spend time, explicitly, addressing barriers, and whether or not they *truly* exist.

Perhaps the issue of barriers could also be revisited post-practicum to allow for further discussion once the participants have experienced the workshop firsthand. If barriers are within the construct of the teachers' mind of *what is possible* in education, can we help push them out of that construct? If barriers truly do exist in the school system, can we address ways, specifically, for teachers to be able to approach their administration with the methods and experience they gained throughout the workshop? Are there resources and/or strategies they can use to win over their administration? If so, this must be intentionally addressed.

Moreover, is it possible to invite administrators of surrounding schools (preferably, the schools where teachers are placed) to come observe and experience the workshop themselves? By seeing the power of play, firsthand, would they feel more inclined to allow it in their schools? Could the workshop serve as a model school, where administrators from surrounding districts could come and learn? By doing so, it may be possible to achieve more buy-in from the school districts, so that teachers may not feel the need to have to advocate for play, knowing they have the support of their administration.

Practicality of Play in the Classroom

There were other aspects of the workshop that related to the practicality of play, and how it could realistically work in a school setting. While some teachers embraced the unstructured nature of the workshop, others felt that they could only take pieces of what they learned and apply it to their own classroom. With that, might there be times throughout the teacher preparation work to address ways to introduce play into the classroom in more manageable aspects, so that teachers are not overwhelmed by the un-structuredness, as a whole? Could there be elements of the overwhelming aspects of play that cause a teacher not to embrace it? And if so, how can we help alleviate some of that initial anxiety that sometimes accompanies play?

Might there also be times throughout teacher preparation work to highlight the intermingling of play-based learning *and* curriculum-learning, so that teachers who feel more aligned with the latter might still be willing to include play alongside curriculum? The goal, then, being to push teachers to realize the practical aspects of play, especially for those who may be skeptical of how it might work in a school setting. This might include discussion, video examples, or even time working alongside other teachers in the field who integrate play into their classrooms.

Impacts of Pandemic

While not a major theme in this study, there was an underlying thread related to the pandemic – for children and teachers, alike. This summer was the first time this particular workshop had been re-opened to welcome children, following the shutdown that occurred in the Spring of 2020. Many teachers expressed that this was their first in-person exposure to any kind of practicum experience, as the pandemic has shifted so much of our approach in education today. With online learning become more of a viable option for university students in teacher preparation programs, it is worth considering the impact of online learning and its effectiveness in preparing our future educators. There were also threads concerning how the pandemic has impacted the children in our classrooms today. Some participants noted the gaps they observed, socially and academically, when children shifted to online learning and were then reintroduced into an in-person classroom. The same teachers suggested that play might be a bridge to get those children back to where they should be developmentally. Taking a more critical look at the pandemic, in terms of how it has shifted both teacher preparation programs *and* primary schools, would benefit schools and universities, alike - especially considering the value of play and the impact it may have on those children.

Study Limitations

This study is limited in sample size and in the selection of participants, and therefore, may not be widely generalizable to other pre- or in-service teachers. The participants were purposefully selected from a practicum placement which, while not required, was highly encouraged as part of their teacher preparation work. All university students who are pursuing an undergraduate or graduate degree with an Early Childhood emphasis are urged to participate in the play and inquiry practicum, hosted by the university (in partnership with the local Independent School District). However, participation in this particular study was voluntary. In addition, answers to pre- and post-surveys were self-reported, which is another limitation of this study. Follow-up interviews were conducted with participants in response to survey answers to help mediate any misunderstandings as collected by survey responses. Finally, this study does not take into consideration the teachers' level of education (as some university students were undergraduate and some were graduate level), any past exposure to play-based methods or theories, or any biological or environmental factors which may contribute to a teacher's disposition regarding play (e.g., race, sex, socio-economic status, parental status, etc.). Rather, these participants were selected purposefully and intentionally to look at how one practicum experience in a play-based environment influenced their perceptions of play. Because of this, I had no control over the number of participants, the diversity of participants, and was not able to use random sampling for a more robust participant pool.

There were other limitations, which revolved around the quantitative instrument selected for Pre-, Post 1, and Post 2 surveys. One noted limitation was that a true baseline was not achieved for the Pre-Survey. Though initial surveys were sent electronically via Survey Monkey prior to the start of the readings week, there was low response rate (n = 3). Because of this,

teachers were asked to take the survey in person on paper at the start of the intensive week of teacher preparation work, which resulted in an increase in total participant numbers (n = 27). However, because of this, teachers likely had higher initial scores on their Pre-Surveys, given that they had already completed a week of readings on the theory and application of play. A true baseline could have only been achieved if survey responses had been submitted prior to the start of the readings week.

There was a second limitation with the survey instrument, as some teachers found the rating scale to be confusing. The Future Professionals Survey, developed by Jung and Jin (2014) asked teachers to rate their values of play on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). After administering the Pre-survey, I was approached by a few participants who were unsure as to what the indicators two through five represented. Because of this, before administering the Post 1 Survey, I tried to explain the variance in the rating scale. This may have possibly contributed to the drop in Post 1 composite scores. Moving forward, one adjustment that should be made to the instrument would be to add labels to each of the indicators (e.g., 1. Strongly disagree, 2. Disagree, 3. Somewhat disagree, 4. Somewhat agree, 5. Agree, 6. Strongly agree). This may help to alleviate confusion on the rating scale, and provide a more accurate representation of the teachers' perceptions of play.

There were also limitations in the observational aspect of data collection, due to participant and personal absences. The reality of conducting in-person research in the midst of a pandemic meant that exposures happened and participants were required to quarantine at various points in time throughout the workshop. I was unable to observe week three of the workshop due to personal and family illness. Any missed time in field research, while unavoidable, would be considered a limitation in this study.

Due to scheduling and large participant numbers, there were also limitations in the interview portion of data collection. While all participants agreed to take part in an interview, it was simply unfeasible, given the amount of time required to conduct an in depth interview, and the responsibilities the teachers had to oversee the workshop. Along with that, there were limitations in the placement of participant interviews – some interviewed as early as the morning of the first day of the workshop (week two), while others were interviewed after the conclusion of the workshop (week four). Because of this, participants had a variance in their lived experiences at the time they completed their interviews. As best as I could, I tried to include a diverse perspective of experiences, including both pre- and in-service teachers, both in week two and week four. However, this is a noted limitation of this study.

Future Research

Future research would exclude participants who are not able to complete a pre-survey prior to the start of the study. This was a noted limitation in this study, and would be mitigated by establishing a true baseline on teachers' perceptions of play. Future research may also consider teachers' past exposure to play-based methods, either as part of their teacher preparation work or otherwise. We may also consider the variances of impact on undergraduate and graduate students, and the impact the workshop has on teachers who are already in classrooms (i.e., in-service teachers) compared to those who are not (i.e., pre-service teachers). Likewise, we may take into consideration years of classroom experience, and how that may impact a teacher's perception of play. That is, are novice teachers more likely to embrace play than veteran teachers? Or is the reverse true? We may also explore environmental impacts on teachers' perceptions of play. We may consider ethnicity, age, upbringing, socio-economic status, and even geographic information. Again, future research may also consider the impacts of the

pandemic on teacher preparation programs, practicum experiences, and even on the children themselves. If there are underlying threads of the impact of the pandemic, it should be explored more in depth.

It may also be worth exploring the schools that teachers are placed in to see how play is embraced by the administration. That is, are teachers who have administrative support more likely to embrace a play-based pedagogy, as Keung and Cheung (2019) suggested? Likewise, are those placed in schools with more classical views less likely to embrace play? Further, are there differences in perception for teachers placed in public, private, or independent schools? Future research might also consider gauging the teachers' perceptions of play on a week-by-week basis, to track growth and/or changes in perception via smaller increments of time. By doing so, we may better determine indicators that cause participants' scores to increase or decrease, in an effort to pinpoint, specifically, what parts of the practicum experience are pushing teachers more towards play or further away from it. For instance, are there elements of teacher fatigue that cause some participants to decline in their perceptions of play by the end of the workshop? And, if so, would we consider the workshop to be too long or too intense? Further, how could we mitigate that, to help teachers maintain a high perception of play as they enter classrooms of their own?

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Appendix A. Subject Informed Consent

Pre- and In-service Teachers' Perceptions Surrounding Play

Subject Informed Consent

Introduction and Background Information

You are invited to participate in a research study. The study is being conducted by Erika Nygard, a PhD candidate at Bellarmine University, under the supervision of Dr. Ali Taylor (Bellarmine University) and Dr. Tim Kinard (Texas State University). The study is sponsored by the Annsley Frazier Thornton School of Education, Bellarmine University in partnership with Texas State University. The study will take place during Texas State's Summer Inquiry program held in June of 2022. Approximately 25-30 subjects will be invited to participate. Your participation in this study will last throughout the month of June, with a pre-survey issued at the end of May, and a follow up survey issued in July, approximately six weeks.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to look at how the perceptions of pre- and in-service teachers change regarding play and storytelling after participating in a play and inquiry practicum. The results and findings from this research study will help inform early childhood education teacher preparation programs.

Procedures

In this study, you will be asked to complete an online survey three different times. The survey, designed by Jung and Jin (2014), includes 11-scale items, and was designed to measure preservice teachers' perceptions of play. You will take this survey prior to the start of the summer inquiry program (May of 2022), again after the initial week of teacher preparation (June of 2022), and finally, after the conclusion of the program (July of 2022). It is anticipated that the survey will take about 10-15 minutes to complete. In addition, you will be asked to participate in both structured and unstructured interviews. Each participant will participate in one structured interview which will take approximately 30-45 minutes. Structured interviews will happen during weeks 2 and 3 of the study. Unstructured interviews will occur throughout the study and will happen spontaneously throughout the workshop. You are free to decline to answer any questions that may make you feel uncomfortable.

Potential Risks

There are no significant foreseeable risks to this study.

Benefits

The possible benefits of this study include better knowledge surrounding teacher preparation programs and practicum experiences for early childhood education majors. The data collected in this study may not otherwise benefit you directly. However, the information learned from this research may be helpful to others in the future. In addition, in exchange for your participation, you will be entered to win one of two $50 gift cards to Target.

Confidentiality
Although absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, confidentiality will be protected to the extent permitted by law. The Institutional Review Board may inspect the research records. Should the data collected in this research study be published, your identity will not be revealed.

Voluntary Participation
Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw your consent at any time without penalty or losing benefit to which you are otherwise entitled.

Your Rights as a Research Subject and Contact Persons
If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may call the Institutional Review Board Office at 502.272.8032. You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions, in confidence, with a member of the Board. This is an independent committee composed of members of the University community and lay members of the community not connected with this institution. The Board has reviewed this study.

You acknowledge that all your present questions have been answered in language you can understand. If you have any questions about the study, please contact Erika Nygard (enygard@bellarmine.edu), Dr. Alexandra Taylor (ataylor9@bellarmine.edu) or Dr. Tim Kinard (timkinard@txstate.edu).

Consent
You have discussed the above information and hereby consent to voluntarily participate in this study. You have been given a copy of this consent form.

_____ _____
Signature of Subject or Legal Representative Date Signed

_____ _____
Signature of Investigator Date Signed

_____ _____
Signature of Person Explaining Consent if other than Investigator Date Signed

Appendix B. Survey Instrument

Teachers' Perceptions of Play

For the following survey questions, please circle the answer that best represents your opinion.

1. Play will continue to be important in educational settings.

1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

2. Play is important to the development of social skills in children.

1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

3. Play is important to the development of emotional skills in children.

1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

4. I do not believe the use of play in teaching would support students' learning.

1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

5. Integrating play in teaching will help my future students' learning.

1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

6. Play helps children to learn effectively.

1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

7. Use of play promotes learning.

1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

8. Play is important to the development of cognitive skills in children.

1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

9. Using play stimulates interest in subject matter.

1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

10. Play-based curriculum is confusing to me.

1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

11. Children learn better from classrooms with standards-based curriculum than play-based curriculum.

1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

12. To be entered into our Target gift card raffle, please provide your name and contact information.

Name:

Email Address:

Phone Number:

13. Are you an undergraduate student or graduate student? (circle your response)

Undergraduate Student

Graduate Student

14. Do you consider yourself a pre-service teacher or an in-service teacher? (circle your response)

Pre-Service Teacher

In-Service Teacher

15. How many years of early childhood classroom experience do you have? (circle your response)

No Experience

1 Year of Experience or Less

2-4 Years of Experience

5-9 Years of Experience

10 or More Years of Experience

16. Ethic Origins (circle your response)

White or Caucasian

Black or African American

Hispanic or Latino

Asian or Asian American

American Indian or Alaska Native

Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander

Another race

Prefer not to answer

17. Demographic Information (circle your response)

Under 18

18-24

25-34

35-44

45-54

55-64

65+

Prefer not to answer

18. Gender/Gender Identity (circle your response)

Woman

Man

Non-binary

Not listed

Prefer not to answer

Appendix C. Structured Interview Protocol

1. What value does play have in education? How do you feel your values surrounding play shifting throughout this experience, if at all?
2. How do you believe young children learn best?
3. As a teacher, what do you feel is your primary role in the classroom?
4. Do you feel that children learn best when they discover something on their own? Why or why not?
5. How do you align your lesson plans? With curriculum? Standards? The children's interests? A combination of approaches?
6. How do you see yourself teaching math in an early childhood classroom?
7. How do you see yourself teaching science in an early childhood classroom?
8. How do you see yourself teaching literacy in an early childhood classroom?
9. How will you assess your children?
10. How will you use play in your pedagogy, if at all?
11. Is there anything else you would like to share about your teaching philosophy?