PARENTS’ BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES ABOUT A PLAY CURRICULUM

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Parents select the type of school and curriculum they think best for their children. Some factors influencing their school choice include practicality, location, affordability, and previous experience with the school. Knowledge and understanding of the various components of early childhood curricula enhance the ability of parents to choose a curriculum best suited for the child.

The purpose of this study was to unfold vital information pertaining to parents’ beliefs and attitudes about a play-based curriculum through qualitative methods, including interview, narrative, and observation. Commonalities, differences, and emergent themes in the responses of parent participants were analyzed.

Initial findings revealed structure, socialization, and reputation as the three overriding themes. The participants shared these common threads as a reason for choosing Commercial Preschool. They explained that their children needed a structured environment as an introduction to education. A concern with the ability to socialize with peers echoed among all participants, and the reputation of Commercial Preschool assured these parents that their needs would be met.
Additional analysis uncovered a deeper theme: preparation. The participants focused intently on their children’s future and preparation for “real school,” for college, and for life. All participants stated that their children would need structure in order to be able to sit and perform well at the next level of education. Success at this early level would help prepare them for college, which would prepare them for successful lives. Attending preschool would assist in preparing their young children to interact with others.

The final theme to emerge was fear. Parenthood is fraught with fear—fear that the child will be unprepared for school, unable to matriculate at a reputable college, unable to engage in a successful career, unable to live a good life. Such fears drove their early education choices.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Parents touring my preschool have frequently told me, “I just want my child to have fun!” The importance of fun, however, seems to diminish as children reach 3 or 4 years of age, a point when some parents believe preparation for “real school” should commence. Standards, standardized tests, honors, and grades will soon become parents’ greatest concerns. Somewhere in the process, the comment about fun is replaced with questions pertaining to kindergarten readiness and requests for worksheets, homework, and some sort of “grade.”

As a preschool owner–educator, I vividly remember the day I decided to leave an incredible 13-year career as a public school teacher in one of Ohio’s wealthiest school districts to own and run my own preschool. Because I loved teaching, the decision was not an easy one. Leaving the classroom was one of the most difficult professional decisions I have ever made; however, the standards and standardized testing dictating curriculum practice were in complete conflict with my professional beliefs. After exploring available options, I elected to remain in education with a move to teaching young children, who at the time seemed exempt from the overt pressure of standardized testing. I envisioned a facility where play was embraced as the primary learning philosophy, where children’s interests and focus groups were valued, and where multiculturalism was integrated into the curriculum.
Even though I could not have been more pleased with my decision to walk away from a lucrative retirement plan, a substantial salary, and a family-friendly schedule to share my ideals with young learners, little did I realize that the same nightmares that plagued me in the public schools, in time, would resurface at my preschool. Although research on play and cognitive development has provided substantial support for a play-based curriculum for young children, the recent state and national emphasis on proficiency test performance has reduced play time in primary and preschool settings. Many preschools and elementary school administrators have reduced or eliminated play from their schedules (Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Brandon, 2002; D. Johnson, 1998; Murline, 2000; Sisson, 2011; Vail, 2003). Play, including small segments, has gradually been replaced with academic readiness practice, particularly in literacy and reading, to match the content of standardized testing (Brandon, 2002; Fromberg, 1990; D. Johnson, 1998; Steinhauer, 2005; Vail, 2003).

The constant struggle for accountability, the “top-down standards and coercive pressure to raise scores on an endless series of standardized tests” (Kohn, 2000, p. 572), and the battle to improve education have dictated current educational trends. Even if a program includes play, the external forces that continue to press for academics constantly threaten the foundation upon which young children build their educational future. Almon stated, “We strip them of their best innate confidence in directing their own learning, hurry them along, and often wear them out” (2003, p. 4). This move toward an academic foundation in the early years may result in educators losing sight of a fundamental purpose of learning: to instill a natural desire to investigate, to wonder, to be inquisitive,
to know. If policymakers continue to create a test-prep curriculum in which emphasis is on reading test scores instead of on motivating children to read for pleasure and information throughout their lives, my concern is that they may create quite the opposite effect or at a minimum exert an unwanted, negative impact on cognitive development, resulting in a lack of motivation to learn (Kohn, 2009).

The global challenge of the Information Age has prompted policymakers to redefine school achievement. The move by government officials to establish educational standards through the No Child Left Behind Act was based on the decline in educational standards since the 1970s (Peterson & West, 2003). At the time of this writing, standards-based curricula, formal evaluation methods, and a numerical grading system were in place at most schools in response to the call for transformation in education. The US ranks only 19th on the Literacy Index, established by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (“A Human Rights-Based Approach,” 2007). These data support the trend in education toward academic standards and imply the need for preschool educators to respond accordingly; in fact, many have responded with standards-based curricula. An emphasis on standards-based curricula has led to limiting children’s opportunities to play (Sisson, 2011). In this context understanding parents’ perspectives is important because they are in a position to make important decisions about their children’s education. Whether deciding the school to which to send their children or supporting the teacher, parents play an important role; thus, understanding their perspectives is important. Parents who have witnessed the relevance of a play-based curriculum to the current education system and to the broader aspects of their children’s
lives served as the resources in this research to determine what information they drew upon when making decisions about early education for their children. In this study their beliefs and attitudes about a play-based curriculum were assessed.

In the US the decision to leave a young child with a nonfamily member is common. The difficulty associated with such a decision provided the impetus for study at this stage in my life: I am a 48-year-old mother of two daughters, ages 15 and 17, pursuing a Ph.D. in curriculum and instruction with a focus on early childhood. When I take families on tour of the center that I own and operate, parents always assure me that they are seeking the best possible preschool for their children. On one occasion a very attractive, well-dressed woman in her mid-30s entered the foyer of my school, holding an expensive handbag in one hand and a list of questions in the other, and initiated her quest for the perfect childcare center. This well-spoken mother had a 2-year-old son and an infant daughter. She, an attorney, and her husband, a resident physician, had just moved to the community from Washington, DC.

During the tour I introduced myself and described my background and that of the school. As always, I offered a brief description of our philosophy, which included the importance of play; a tour of the facility, where children were visibly playing both in classrooms and outdoors; an introduction to all teachers; and finally, a meeting in my office, where we addressed all questions on her list. Such a list typically includes issues of safety and security, teacher–student ratios, attendance policy, discipline policy, sanitation procedures, lunches and snacks, and tuition. In this instance, curriculum was never mentioned, even after I spoke of our play-based philosophy. Such things did not
seem important to this mother; instead she asked about teacher turnover, how many infants were currently enrolled, how many teachers were in the classroom, and whether her baby would be rocked to sleep. She asked whether her young toddler would visit the gym, which is located in the adjacent building; whether he would go outside every day; and whether he could participate in karate and soccer. I answered all of her questions and provided her with literature supporting everything discussed during the tour, including curriculum framework and philosophy, as well as a business card with the school’s web address in case she sought any additional information.

This mother called later that day to announce that her decision was made, and her children would enroll and attend the following Monday. That was two years ago. Her children, now ages 3 and 5, still attend the school full time. Both are in the West facility, which houses older children in preschool, prekindergarten (preK), junior kindergarten, kindergarten, and the after-school program. Her children have thrived cognitively and socially, yet two years after enrolling, her concern shifted to academic readiness. She made an appointment with me to review the Ohio preK standards, which she had received from her neighbor. Our hour-and-a-half meeting consisted of examples of just how these standards were implemented, met, and mastered without the use of paper and pencil, drill, skill worksheets, and assessment tools. Our philosophy has not changed nor has her desire for her children to have fun altered, but the need for reassurance that her children were adequately prepared for success in school created a level of uncertainty. Walking through her son’s and daughter’s classrooms daily and observing children building with blocks, engaging in dramatic play, manipulating sand and water, and working at art
stations reassured her that they were indeed having fun; but she wondered what they were learning and how she could be sure they were adequately prepared for school. This scenario drove the main research question of this study: What beliefs and attitudes do parents hold about an early childhood play-based curriculum in a local preschool where their child is currently enrolled?

A strong advocate of play for small children, I wanted to seek answers to the following questions: On what foundation do parents form their attitudes about learning? How are they informed, and how do they reach their final conclusions? In my study I therefore ascertained parents’ beliefs and attitudes concerning a play-based curriculum to better understand factors influencing their positions.

To secure well-informed research findings, I based the findings on the data derived from interviews, observations, documents, and documentation involving parents whose children were enrolled in a play-based center at the time of the research. I interviewed a total of six parents three times. The interviews comprised (a) a life history interview, (b) a context interview that included a summary of their situations, and (c) a follow-up interview. In addition to the three interviews, I observed these parents at PTO meetings as well as various parent celebrations, such as A Day in the Life of Preschooler, Muffins with Mom, Root Beer and Pretzels with Dad, Parents’ Night Out, Parents’ Information Evening, and Children’s Expo. The following supplementary artifacts were reviewed: newspaper articles featuring this preschool, hereafter designated in this paper by the pseudonym Commercial Preschool; Parent Handbook; newsletters; research articles distributed to the parents; and literature about the school, including its mission
statement, student rights, and student portfolio information. The Parent Handbook and literature about the school, including the school’s mission statement, student rights, and student portfolio information, were also reviewed as additional data to understand how they were situated in place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

**About Early Childhood Education Programs**

Early childhood education programs provide foundational learning experiences to very young children as well as the social, emotional, and cultural interaction they require to mature and develop socially. At the same time, early childhood educators strive to provide children with basic skills in literacy and numeracy, both crucial for success at all levels of education. A wide variation exists in childcare programs in the United States; they range from basic care, sometimes simply custodial-based care, to nationally accredited early childhood programs, such as those promoted by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). A number of early childhood education models are in place: Montessori and academic outcomes-based as well as play-based models, such as Reggio-Emilia and Waldorf. Each is based on differing philosophies and educational objectives, but the well-being of the child and contribution to experiential learning theory lie at the heart of all of them (Singer, Singer, Plaskon, & Schweder, 2003).

**Theoretical Framework**

Social constructivist theory served as the theoretical framework of this study. Its proponents claim that individuals’ perceptions of the reality around them shape their thoughts and behavior (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and that the construction of meaning
is a process “forged in the crucible of everyday interaction . . . . Meanings are negotiated, exchanged, and modified through everyday interactions with others” (Rosenholtz, 1989, p. 3). According to social constructivist theory people construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through their experiences and reflection upon them.

Constructivists posit that children develop their own concepts of things based on the influence of people, prior knowledge, and experience. Through these influences, children perceive, analyze, and eventually develop their own ideas regarding the world; therefore, prior skills used at play may be applied to other situations, such as problem solving, analysis, or decision making. Play is thus an important part of children’s lives, serving as their introduction to higher-level skills and difficult life challenges. In particular, Vygotsky’s (1978) theoretical perspectives on sociocultural development and learning supported the basis for constructivism and the importance of play in a child’s development. In “Play and the Psychological Development of the Child,” his final lecture, Vygotsky emphasized the importance of play during the child’s early years. He stated that play is part of a child’s zone of proximal development (ZPD), that is, the distance between the actual developmental level, as determined by independent problem solving, and the level of potential development by independent problem solving and the level of potential as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 6)

Vygotsky (1978) stated that interactions between the child and adult are central to the educational process and explained that thinking develops through the mediation of
others. Although earlier theories on child development do not directly include play as an essential aspect of cognitive development, constructivists recognized it as an important factor affecting children’s interests and social development. In addition, neuroscience has contributed to the view that physical and age-related play enhances brain, physical, and overall development (Frost, 1998).

Knowledge is exchanged and transferred through language and interaction, a social and cultural construct, with conversation encouraging student contributions and creating an understanding of knowledge, experiences, and values. During play, children behave in ways typical of those beyond their ages, discovering new ways of performing tasks, such as creatively using blocks of different shapes and building them to new heights. As they thus engage, they explore the depths, improving their ability to learn. Vygotsky emphasized social interaction, which is also relevant in parents’ understanding of the best environment for their children. His sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), which has been used to understand the significance of context, suggests that one’s understanding of the world and the self is connected to relationships with self and others (Schwandt, 1994; Scribner, 1990). He furthermore implied that parents form an understanding of what constitutes a suitable educational environment for their child based on their expectations, which have been informed by their own repertoire of experiences.

I also subscribed to the view that when people encounter something new, they must reconcile it with their previous ideas and experiences, perhaps changing what they believe or discarding the new information as irrelevant. I embraced the idea that people are active creators of their own knowledge. In this study, the questions were designed to
elicit from parents their beliefs and attitudes, conceptions or misconceptions, surrounding a play-based early childhood curriculum; the answers to the questions were subsequently analyzed in order to understand parents’ beliefs and attitudes about a play-based early childhood curriculum. The aim of this research was to contribute to the body of scholarly knowledge regarding parents’ perspectives on early childhood curricula. In addition, research results may be used to help future program administrators and parents understand the benefits and limitations of a play-based curriculum.

Similarly, neuroscience has provided support for a child’s play. Frost (1998) asserted that “play builds brains”: Directed and spontaneous play helps children build social and cognitive skills. Frost showed that brain development is further improved as children engage in age-appropriate play and that, by contrast, deprivation of play could result in aberrant behavior. Approaching this study from a constructivist perspective and drawing on Vygotsky’s social cultural theory, I chose case study, drawing upon Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) narrative inquiry to investigate parents’ beliefs and attitudes about an early childhood play-based curriculum.

**Research Questions and Methodology Focus**

The main research question for this study was as follows: What are parents’ beliefs and attitudes about an early childhood play-based curriculum?

Supporting research questions included the following:

1. How have parents’ personal experiences in school contributed to their beliefs about how children learn?

2. What are parents’ future goals for their children?
3. In what ways do parents think about the implications of early learning?

4. What outside factors influence the way parents understand how children learn?

5. What do parents know about the curriculum currently practiced at Commercial Preschool?

I drew upon Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) three-dimensional narrative inquiry space because it lends itself to eliciting an understanding of meaning within the context of parents’ stories. Clandinin and Connelly concurred with Dewey (1938/1998) that the ultimate aim of research is the study of human experience; thus, three-dimensional narrative inquiry space served as a guide to drawing out the content of human lives in order to understand life experiences. Personal and social dimensions point both inward and outward—inward “toward the internal conditions, such as feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions [and outward] toward the existential conditions. [Moving backward and forward points] to temporality—past, present, and future” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50).

I have identified several supporting research questions for use throughout the three-dimensional interviewing process (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In looking both forward and backward, I was interested in understanding how individuals’ life histories informed their current beliefs and attitudes toward play-based curriculums. In looking inward and outward, I was interested in understanding what outside factors influenced their current beliefs and attitudes toward play-based curriculum. In terms of the goals of this study, case study and narrative design were appropriate methodologies, allowing me
to witness and report a descriptive setting in order to allow their shared experiences and stories to unfold.

**Narrative Inquiry**

For the purpose of this study, I drew upon narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to investigate six parents’ beliefs and attitudes about the play-based curriculum at a privately owned early childhood facility. From the social constructivist perspective, which I adopted, experiences are significant. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) also suggested that experience is significant in their three-dimensional framework for studying how the participants’ past, present, and future contexts influenced their beliefs and attitudes. Drawing from narrative inquiry helped me to understand how parents’ beliefs and attitudes about a play-based curriculum as informed by their three dimensions of space. This unique approach was attractive because it provided the opportunity for the parents’ voices to be heard. I used narrative inquiry to explore how their decisions to enroll their children in a play-based curriculum facility evolved and were influenced. Their shared stories revealed their motivations.

For the qualitative data-collection method in this study, I relied upon the narrative in-depth interview, which can elicit far richer information than a survey; furthermore, interviews offered a means to clarify and validate participant responses. Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2000) posited that individual behaviors can be understood only by comprehending individuals’ interpretations of the world around them; therefore, meaningful social action must be interpreted from the point of view of the actors or the people involved in that particular situation. Parents who have already enrolled their child
in a play-based preschool may naturally feel more strongly about it than parents who have not sent their child to a play-based preschool (Bryman, 2004). In this qualitative case study I examined preschool parents’ beliefs and attitudes using a narrative inquiry data-collection strategy in order to showcase parents’ experiences with and perceptions of a play-based curriculum in an early childhood program. Through case study and narrative inquiry I sought to understand particular details in a historically and socially bound context (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Case Study

I adopted the case study design in this study because individual cases provide plentiful in-depth information. Case studies typically focus on the individual, his or her experiences, and immediate reality, which are needed to derive meaning and understanding of the issue or concept under examination; moreover, they provide real examples from real people, who are unencumbered by the use of predetermined measures or surveys and whose responses will result only in numbers and statistics (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Individuals in this study—primary care givers (either mother or father in one family)—had a child or children enrolled in a school where a play-based curriculum was implemented. They were interviewed and asked to share their stories based on open-ended questions corresponding to the overarching research questions. Their experiences and beliefs were then discussed in order to arrive at a clear understanding of the research topic: assessment of parents’ beliefs and attitudes about a play-based curriculum. I expected that other factors, such as race, religion, and socioeconomic
status, would influence the experiences and thoughts of parents; thus, the parents recruited for the study came from varied backgrounds.

For participation in this study, I recruited families whose children were enrolled in an early childhood program very similar to that described in the opening story; they came from approximately the same demographics, including but not limited to upper-middle class, educated, two-parent households. The philosophy at Commercial Preschool is the same as that of the school I own and operate, but it is not the school I own. In the recent past, these childcare centers in Northeast Ohio have served Caucasian families almost exclusively. Although the student population of the school where the study was conducted had grown more culturally diverse over time, that is, inclusive of Asian, Indian, African American, and a few biracial families, such a cultural representation continued to be the exception in the area at the time of this study. To summarize, the preschool program from which study participants were selected was in operation at a commercial brand preschool (Commercial Preschool), where a play-based curriculum was implemented and where upper- and upper middle-class, educated, two-parent families were generally served.

**Purpose of the Study**

I believe all parents should have a thorough understanding of the curriculum that their child experiences, whether in preschool or in another educational setting. Preschools enjoy a certain amount of flexibility in the way young children are taught. Various teaching models are available, with some schools employing more than one model (e.g., Montessori and Reggio Emilia). When parents know and understand the
curriculum of their child’s preschool, they are in a better position to become involved in the school’s activities. They then know how to reinforce their child’s learning at home and tend to collaborate more with teachers (Sisson, 2009).

My main research question—What are parents’ beliefs and attitudes about an early childhood play-based curriculum?—had multiple purposes. The five supporting research questions were as follows:

1. How do parents’ personal experiences in school contribute to their beliefs about how children learn?
2. What are parents’ goals for their children’s futures?
3. In what ways do parents think about the implications of early learning?
4. What outside factors influence the way parents understand how children learn?
5. What do parents know about the curriculum currently practiced at Commercial Preschool?

This research is significant because it provides personnel in the early childhood and broader education sectors with research concerning parents’ beliefs and attitudes about play-based curriculum; it exposes parents’ views about the way a play-based curriculum affects their children’s learning and development; and it shows whether parents believe that a play-based curriculum is an effective tool for early childhood education.

**Statement of the Problem**

Early childhood researchers have reported that young children learn best through activities that support the development of the whole child (Elkind, 2001a). In “Young
Einsteins: Much Too Early,” Elkind (2001b) argued that young children learn best through direct interaction with their environment. Before a certain age, they are simply incapable of the level of reasoning necessary for formal instruction; however, national concern with accountability, competition, testing, and “back-to-basics,” places an overemphasis on academics and single-subject teaching (Elkind, 2007; Ornstein et al., 1998; Perrone, 2000). In response to these concerns, early childhood educators may focus the curriculum on the teaching of academic skills (Morrison, 2000). In some programs these factors have led to narrowly defined curricula, which deny young children valuable life experiences found in play. Although a growing concern for math and language ability in the upper grades has prompted the implementation of standards-based curriculum, imposing this type of system at the preschool level is imprudent. Educators must seriously consider the differences in approach to learning by children as opposed to adults: Unlike adults, children, especially young ones, need play (Ginsburg et al., 2007). For an activity to engage their interest, they need to be interested in that activity; therefore, play in the preschool should not be disregarded. If an early childhood educator can ascertain parents’ beliefs and attitudes about instruction through play that is supported by research, she or he can cultivate parents’ understanding of this type of curriculum. A study of parents’ beliefs and attitudes about a play-based early childhood curriculum can provide information useful to teachers and administrators as they plan strategies for implementing a successful preschool program.
Rationale

With the demand for effectiveness, high test scores, and accountability, many preschool administrators and educators have adopted and reinforced formal instruction and have used play for recreation instead of as a learning medium. In a state-wide survey conducted in Oregon with all kindergarten teachers and principals with first-grade teachers, Hitz and Wright (1988) found that 64% of kindergarten teachers, 61% of principals, and 72% of first-grade teachers reported that formal academic instruction was more prevalent in kindergarten at the time of the survey than it had been 10 to 20 years earlier. Hitz and Wright’s participants may have considered play less important than formal instruction for cognitive development. Creative play may be viewed as irrelevant to the development of thinking and problem solving. When teachers and administrators overemphasize academics, doing so comes at the expense of play, which is valuable to children’s learning and development.

Early childhood educators have shown concern about the type of instruction used in their education programs. Practices used in prekindergarten and kindergarten classes typically reflect an environmentalist–behaviorist view even though teachers reported having other views (Daniels & Shumow, 2003). Kindergarten programs have also changed and often emphasize academic skills that were previously reserved for older children (E. B. Freeman & Hatch, 1989; Hitz & Wright, 1988; Karweit, 1988; Shepard & Smith, 1988). In a study on teacher practice, Hatch and Freeman (1988) found that two thirds of early childhood teachers implemented programs in conflict with their early childhood learning philosophies. Early childhood experts have long urged that programs
for young children should provide for the development of social, emotional, physical, cognitive, and creative skills; however, the findings noted above reflect a shift in this advice. In short, a gap exists between researchers’ recommendations and teachers’ practices (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Logue, Eheart, & Leavitt, 1996).

Understanding parents’ beliefs is important because parents’ support for school curriculum and pedagogy is important. Parents’ beliefs and attitudes about a curriculum and later their decisions are typically influenced by their own beliefs, experiences, and attitudes. Consequently, their views affect the implementation of programs for their young children. Although this study did not confirm that parents’ views regarding curriculum are sufficient to effect a favorable program, I nevertheless considered their views because they formed a large part of children’s learning environment. Gaining their perspectives about play-based education is important; aside from the teacher, parents are the ones who have access to information regarding their children’s development and ability, whether in or outside school.

**Road Map of the Document**

The literature review in Chapter 2 describes the context in which preschool programs, play-based curricula, and parents’ choices have been studied in the past as well as the context in which play has been integrated into early childhood education in the United States; it also describes parents’ views of play as a part of the preschool curriculum. The research findings on parents’ beliefs can enhance current practice in early childhood education. The literature review is organized into three sections: (a)
theories on child learning, (b) curricula used in preschool education, and (c) parents’ beliefs on play-based childhood education. The overview is followed by a discussion of the play-based curriculum. The literature review concludes with a presentation of the parents’ choices.

Chapter 3 further describes and justifies the methodology I used in this study: case study and narrative inquiry. The chapter also provides a description of the research setting, the research sample, the data-gathering procedure and analysis, the timeline, and validity and reliability concerns as well as the anticipated limitations of the study. The main research question and the supporting questions have been outlined in detail in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 draws on common themes in the participants’ stories and contains data analysis and findings pointing to the purpose of preschool as preparation for future readiness, that is, academic, social, and behavioral preparation. Chapter 5 focuses on the data collected with regard to academics and play, indicating what counts and does not count as learning, and what counts as a measure of knowledge. The analysis, findings, and discussion clarify the gap between what parents perceive as the nature of knowledge and learning on one hand and the play-based curriculum used at the school on the other. Chapter 6 concludes the research with a discussion and the implications for the preschool community at large, additional research topics, and data findings compared with the literature review.
Keywords

*Early childhood* is a term that designates a period in a child’s life, spanning birth to the age of 8. This is a time of critical change and development as children attain the physical and mental skills they will use for the rest of their lives.

*A preschool program* is defined as a prekindergarten program geared toward preparing children ages 2–5 for kindergarten in the United States. Programs offer various services for different age groups and adopt different curriculum models. In this study, *preschool program* refers to the setting and object of the research work.

*Curriculum model* refers to an educational system that combines theory with practice. An early childhood curriculum model has a theory and knowledge base that reflects a philosophical orientation and is supported, to varying degrees, by child development research and educational evaluation. The practical application of a curriculum model includes guidelines on how to set up the physical environment, structure the activities, interact with children and their families, and support staff members in their initial training and ongoing implementation of the program. In this study, the model used by the preschool program was a play-based curriculum.

*Play-based curriculum* denotes the learning model based on developmentally appropriate play. This child-centered model is based on children’s interest to ensure maximum participation, focus, and learning.

*Developmentally appropriate practice* is a term for practice that is designed for an age group and is implemented with attention to the individual needs and differences of the children enrolled (Bredekamp, 2009). In this study, *developmentally appropriate*
practice refers to the teaching practice of kindergarten teachers as manifested in their classes.

Beliefs is a term that refers to a set of ideas or thoughts that a person finds important or that influences his or her feelings, attitudes, and behavior. They are subjective and can be measured by asking participants to elucidate their thoughts on a certain topic or issue.

Attitudes can be defined as social constructs predetermined by a person’s beliefs. If the belief is negative, then the attitude toward the issue or problem is also negative. Attitudes are associated with stereotypes of what is socially acceptable.

Feelings is a term that denotes the affective component of an individual’s belief and attitude about a certain issue or topic. Feelings are associated with personal experience and evaluation of said issue.

Understanding and perception are terms that refer to the totality of the individual’s beliefs, attitudes, and feelings about a certain issue or topic.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review in this chapter contains the findings from research on play in early childhood education and the beliefs of parents about a play-based curriculum as it relates to the academic and psychosocial development of their children. The goal of the chapter was to describe the context in which play has become integrated in early childhood education in the United States and how parents view play as a part of the preschool curriculum. Research findings on parental beliefs were included to enhance current practice in early childhood education. Understanding what parents know about early childhood learning and why they believe what they know provided insight to their decision making process. The literature review was organized into three sections: (a) early childhood learning theorists (b) curricula used in preschool education, and (c) parents’ beliefs about play-based early childhood education.

This chapter opens with an overview of theories of learning in early childhood that have influenced contemporary education practice. The second section contains a review of current early childhood education curricula and initiatives developed as a response to these theories, including definitions and benefits of a play-based curriculum. The final section focuses on the role of parents and their beliefs about what constitutes developmentally appropriate teaching methods for preschool children as well as their attitudes about the role of play in their child’s academic and psychosocial development. The materials presented in this chapter were gathered from numerous databases, readings,
and library sources; the sources were identified by using keywords, such as *play-based curriculum, preschool, and parental choice*.

**Theories of Learning in Early Childhood Education**

Early childhood education has been established as an important factor in overall human development. Education influences human development from an early age and contributes to the effective emotional, social, and intellectual growth of individuals. From the point of view of traditionalists and rationalists, education has been regarded as a primary source of intellectual development (Blenkin & Kelly, 1996); but such a notion limits the scope of development and a child’s ability to take full advantage of access to educational channels.

Intellectual development has been proven to be a primary expectation in education during the early childhood years (Goodlad, 1984). That parents look for schools supporting the intellectual goals they set for their children is an underlying theme in the current paper; in fact, in the survey given to the six parent participants in this study to gauge their expectations of the school and their beliefs regarding what their child should eventually attain from the program was based on the traditional view of intelligence. Educators develop intelligence by teaching academic subjects to students as opposed to developing human values, which are “fixed” according to Adler and Hutchinson (as cited in Blenkin & Kelly, 1996).

The role of education in intellectual development derives from Plato’s philosopher king. Centuries after Plato, Peters and Hirst asserted that education is instrumental in the development of various areas across a child’s rationality, emphasizing
the role of education in the development of the mind (as cited in Blenkin & Kelly, 1996).

Education has come to mean more than academics; nevertheless, at an early stage students are typically expected to engage in preparation for the long path toward intellectual development. Blenkin and Kelly (1996) suggested that the emergence of the importance of other developmental areas reflects a rejection of a rationalism unable to accommodate the emotional side of human life; neither can that rationalism accommodate individual human differences.

Another theoretical platform for the rational aspect of development and education is based on instrumentality, in which education is viewed as the instrument of development, leading the child eventually to become competent in defined intellectual, economic, vocational, and utilitarian functions. Rousseau, who comes to mind, said that a child is an adult in the making; thus, he or she should be treated as such (as cited in Blenkin & Kelly, 1996). Accordingly, one must look for the adult in the child without necessarily entertaining what the child is before she or he becomes an adult (Blenkin & Kelly, 1996).

With the emergence of educational theories, however, education has been viewed as multifaceted. When prioritizing intellectual goals, the common notion was that the various facets have been integrated with other aspects of development, an approach that further enhances the concept of human development. Some of the best educational theories that have served as a foundation of education in the 20th century are contained in the works of Dewey. With the introduction of the experiential continuum, rationalism
was rejected; and the child or the student was viewed as a continuously developing person in whom the learning process does not end.

Current knowledge about early childhood education, derived from an understanding of the learning process of children, is the result of the work of many influential theorists; but the three that most strongly influenced this research study were Vygotsky, Erikson, and Piaget.

**Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory**

Contemporary theorists of childhood development and learning have found support in the sociocultural theories of learning as adapted from the work of Vygotsky. His sociocultural theory explains that the way individuals perceive reality influences the way they think and act (Berger & Luckmann, 1966); moreover, the way people construct meaning is an on-going process because interpersonal interactions with people lead to the negotiation, exchange, and modification of meaning (Rosenholtz, 1989). People ultimately build their understanding of the world by experiencing and reflecting upon what they experience daily.

Vygotsky emphasized the importance of social relationships in learning and development in his sociocultural theory. Vygotsky (1997) suggested that “the true direction of the development of thinking is not from the individual to the socialized, but from the social to the individual” (p. 51). The bases upon which adults determine the child’s learning strategies eventually dictate the style of teaching to which the child is exposed. Vygotsky (1978) also understood (a) the connection between the past, present, and future; (b) language as an important tool that individuals can use to draw upon the
past to intimately imagine possibilities for the future; and (c) parents’ attitudes and
beliefs about certain learning models for their children as a critical influence on their
overall development.

Tharp and Gallimore (1988) noted the profound implications of the sociocultural
view for education and teaching, specifically that higher order functions develop out of
social interactions. They cited Vygotsky’s argument that child development can be best
understood in terms of their external social world; furthermore, children are drawn to use
cognitive and communicative functions by engaging in activities that require, nurture,
and scaffold these functions. A child’s learning is embedded in social activities and
interactions with people, things, and events in the environment.

Constructivists have posited that children develop their own concepts, based on
prior knowledge and experience. Guided by people, prior knowledge, or experience, they
perceive, analyze, and eventually formulate their own ideas regarding the world.
Consequently, skills formerly developed through play and used during play may be
applied relevantly to other situations, such as problem solving, analysis, or decision
making. These factors make play an important part of children’s lives: Play serves as an
introduction to advanced skills and to difficult life challenges.

Vygotsky (1962) emphasized the importance of play in the development of the
child. In a lecture entitled “Play and the Psychological Development of the Child,” he
reiterated that play must be introduced during the very early years. Play is what he
considered a part of a child’s zone of proximal development (ZPD) or the distance
between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving
and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978).

Moll (2001) explained that Vygotsky’s ideas provided a framework for understanding the holistic aspects of teaching, learning, and thinking as it relates to the broad social and historical cultures of human interactions. During play, the child behaves beyond his or her age and discovers new ways of performing tasks. As the child does so, he or she deeply engages in situations, including some aspects not typically explored, thus leading to improved learning ability. As early as the 1930s, Vygotsky (1978) regarded play, especially make-believe play, as a crucial element in child development, pointing out that play creates a zone of proximal development in children. In play, children always behave beyond their average age, above their daily behavior; in play it is as though they are a head taller than they actually are. As in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form and is itself a major source of development. (Vygotsky, 1978)

Vygotsky considered play to be a tool that the mind can use in order to facilitate children’s mastery over behavior. He held that play functions to guide children in developing self-regulation, increase the separation between thought and action, and foster the skills needed to obtain higher cognitive functioning (Vygotsky, 1978). Separation of thought and action occurs when acting and thinking are no longer used simultaneously by the child. To illustrate, this happens when the child is able to distinguish pretence from reality; for example, when children build a car with blocks, separation of thought and
action occurs when they declare that they will pretend that they are building a car. Vygotsky considered this the preliminary step toward abstract thinking. When children can already exercise their minds through different play activities, they can manipulate ideas and monitor their thoughts without directly referring them to reality. The exercise of play behaviors cultivates a child’s imagination and encourages creativity.

Based on Vygotsky’s theory and constructivism, this framework can be approached in two ways. The cultural theory can be used as (a) a determinant of the parents’ attitudes and beliefs about education models for their children and (b) a platform that can support play-based curriculum.

**Erikson’s Psychosocial Developmental Theory**

Erikson outlined the development of children as a series of development phases. A main element of his psychosocial stage theory is the development of ego identity, defined as the conscious sense of self, which evolves through social interaction. According to Erikson, ego identity constantly changes as a result of new experience and information acquired through daily interaction with others. Erickson further proposed that every stage of development involves a conflict that a child must overcome in order to arrive at another stage. He also described how play develops during the very early years in a child’s life (Erikson, 1950). In the first year of life, children make use of their sensory and motor skills in an attempt to make sense of their bodies. During the second year, they move on to manipulate objects in their surroundings. Play activities that are afforded to children facilitate the development of self-esteem and self-empowerment and
provide them the avenue for self-mastery over objects around them. From mastery of objects, children progress to mastering their interactions with fellow human beings.

According to Erikson the sine qua non of learning is self-regulation, which a child learns through interaction with his or her environment; furthermore, self-regulation is a developmental task that when mastered by the child, requires industriousness and initiative and signals readiness to move on to the next task. Thus, play is beneficial to children in any form, and learning becomes more beneficial when integrated into play. Even simple, solitary play teaches children to focus their attention on a single object or activity and builds patience and perseverance that they can use in advanced forms of learning, such as visual discrimination and reading (Genishi, Dyson, & Fassler, 1994).

The manner in which a child learns is initially perceived in terms of the way the child responds.

Following Erikson’s developmental theory on learning, F. Freeman (2009) asserted that one factor influencing the way a child learns is his or her native or instinctive responses, which can be developed according to some form of strategic training. They indicate the manner in which a child may be inherently equipped with regard to eventual exposure to everyday life. Learning is evident during the development of the range of skills that a person acquires; learning begins with the development of manual skills, followed by memorization. A child demonstrates the ability to learn when applying basic information, such as identifying objects. According to F. Freeman during these early stages, a child already shows signs of the psychology of learning. Natural
responses of children can be further assessed in terms of the “transfer of training [and] economy in mental work” (F. Freeman, 2009, p. 2).

In this case, F. Freeman (2009) maintained that speech, inner choice, and a range of other responses not immediately obvious are incorporated in the skills learned by a child. His theory highlights the complexity of learning and development, in which a combination of internal and external factors contributes to the way a child learns. Internal factors include the physiological and biological characteristics of the child that provide her or him with the basic hardware to learn; formative external aspects interact with internal components. Young children are naturally inquisitive about the world. Their desire to understand it is innate and leads to the effortless self-directed learning that occurs through play (Elkind 1987).

**Piaget’s Cognitive Development Theory**

Jean Piaget was one of the pioneers of the theory of cognitive development, which played an important role in the formation of learning theories in the later part of the 20th century. Piaget’s (1959) rationale was that cognitive development naturally plays a central role in how children learn. Piaget traced the learning of the child as a result of his or her active interaction with the environment; he believed that development is made possible through “a continuing equilibrium between assimilation and accommodation” (Saracho & Spodek, 2003, p. 15). Assimilation occurs when a child assigns an existing schema to reality. The word *schema* refers to “categories of knowledge that help . . . [people] to interpret and understand the world” (Saracho & Spodek, 2003, p. 16). For instance, seeing a cat and labeling it as such is a way of assimilating schema.
Accommodation occurs when a child modifies that schema to fit reality. For instance, a child’s imitating a behavior of a parent is considered accommodation.

Piaget’s work sparked several models of cognitive development, many of which were catalogued by Richardson (1998). For example, the predeterministic nativist model involves the context of learning, demonstrating the presence of certain inborn qualities that fill in the gaps in the daily experience. In other words, a child may learn how to speak based on what he or she hears, but not everything the child hears is perfect; thus, a child has the inborn ability to learn to speak without entirely depending on what his or her environment teaches. The nativist model of cognition is demonstrated in Figure 1.

![Nativist model](image)

**Figure 1.** Nativist model. Source: Richardson, 1998, p. 44.

Mental association is another branch of cognitive development. With roots traced to ancient Greece, association is based on the concept that the innate mental faculties of individuals allow them to create associations that help them to learn. Hence, the registration and storage of memories among individuals are dependent upon how they
create specific association systems in the real world. Thus, when children learn, a sense of imitation and an ability to identify objects using other information are in operation, for example, associating a word with an image (Richardson, 1998).

Many cognitive development theorists have sought to explain a significant component of learning. This approach can touch on psychological aspects, such as motivation to learn and how certain learning approaches are more effective in particular individuals but inefficient in others. Such uniqueness has been supported as early as the infancy stage as representative of how the brain is wired (Meltzoff, 2004).

Beadle (1971) presented a developmental timeline indicating what happens to the child at the moment of birth. He discussed the contribution of physiological factors experienced during the unborn’s time in the womb to his or her eventual development. For instance, a lack of oxygen in unborn children can affect their capacity to learn. This condition can affect the performance of the child’s metabolic process. Once a child is born, she or he faces the challenge of adjusting to extremes as demonstrated in the way a newborn adjusts to the new environment. From the fetal stage to the newborn stage, the baby must adapt to his or her environment. Beadle pointed out that a child learns even at this very early stage.

How children learn certain skills has been covered in the literature. O’Grady (2005) addressed the way children learn languages, providing important insights: “Children’s talent for language is strangely limited—they’re good at learning language but not so good at knowing what to say and what not say” (p. 1). Children learn words by simply picking up the sounds made by the people around them, and words are
eventually picked up from sounds. Depending on the rate of the development of the child, a 1-year-old can already demonstrate the ability to utter about 10 words, whereas some 2-year-olds may already form telegraphic sentences.

O’Grady (2005) explained two learning styles that can be adopted in language learning among children. The first is the analytic, which refers to the approach in which children break speech into smaller and manageable components; thus, they usually end up uttering articulated yet short terms. The second is the Gestalt style of language learning in which children learn by means of memorization. Because the child memorizes words according to the sequence that adults use, they have the opportunity to utter bigger chunks of words; however, according to O’Grady children do not learn language in only one way but instead as a result of the combination of the analytical and Gestalt approaches, demonstrating that with regard to learning styles, many approaches contribute.

Language development and reading are key areas encouraged in play-based curricula (Frost, Wortham, & Reifel, 2001). During play, young children must communicate their wants and their understanding of the play activity to the other children. Thus, play encourages language use and acquisition. In the same respect, children engaging in enjoyable activities like reading and exploration are introduced to a variety of words and letters, activating the mechanism for learning language and literacy (Frost et al., 2001).

Some developmental theorists of the 21st century viewed play in a preschooler’s life from many perspectives, regarding it as (a) a tool that can facilitate children’s
mastery over behavior (Vygotsky, 1967), (b) a private avenue of preschoolers to practice and solidify symbolic schemes (Piaget, 1936), and (c) a means to explore social roles (Erikson, 1950). These early theorists suggested myriad benefits of play in children’s learning and development. These benefits have also been recognized for the crucial role they play in preparing children for the global workforce. Business leaders have suggested that in the Knowledge Age success will depend on possession of a toolkit of skills that includes the Five Cs: collaboration (teamwork, social competence), content (reading, math, science, and history), communication (oral and written), creative innovation, and confidence (taking risks and learning from failure) (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2008). Each of these skills is nurtured through playful learning (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2008). Given the benefits of play in the development of social–emotional and academic skills and in instilling a love of learning, the concern raised in contemporary literature is what is lost by limiting children’s opportunities to play (Hanline, 1999; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2008)

**Curricula Used in Preschool Education**

Various learning theories, such as Piaget’s constructivist theory of cognitive development, Vygotsky’s social cultural theory, Dewey’s experiential and continuous learning, Freud’s and Erikson’s psychodynamic theories, have influenced standards of practice (e.g., Early Learning Content Standards) as well as curriculum models (e.g., academic, play-based, High Scope). They have influenced the development of curricula for early childhood education programs (Saracho & Spodek, 2003), which have been in existence in U.S. educational settings since the first half of the 20th century.
The term *early childhood education* is synonymous with *preschool* and *kindergarten* in the sense that its proponents advocate learning in very young children (Ailwood, 2003). Preschools and kindergartens differ from daycare centers and childcare centers because the programs are guided by a curriculum emphasizing learning through several methods and approaches. Preschools and kindergartens have a strong historical focus on learning life skills and school readiness, whereas daycare centers focus on providing activities and childcare services to young children.

Contemporary trends have deviated from the narrow view of the early stages of learning as preparing the child to achieve intellectual goals; instead, the continuous experience of learning should be established during the early stages. Blenken and Kelly (1996) pointed out the importance of using education to provide channels spanning the affective domain and to avoid limiting education to intellectual development alone. Goals other than intellectual ones have been integrated into the development of early education models; in fact, Hurst (1997) noted that a child’s environment has often been incorporated. Other important components include the relationship of the child with family, relatives, and friends as well as the immediate social realities of the child. Also under current consideration is the culturally diverse society, an ideal setting to which the child should be exposed at an early age. The above noted components have also been reflected in educational policies and practices (Nutbrown, 2002).

Among the various notions of what is early childhood education, many different programs fall into the scope of early childhood education, including public and private preschool, nursery school, daycare centers, kindergarten, primary school Grades 1 through
3, and home-based care, just to name a few. Reviewing the literature on the various curricula used in early childhood education programs has contributed to my understanding of (a) the background of these programs, (b) the variety of choices available to parents, and (c) ways to assist and direct both teachers and parents. Reviewing the existing literature shed light on the conflicting information available to parents; therefore, understanding their beliefs and attitudes through the current study, I can provide insight into the various components of early childhood curricula and support parents’ ability to choose a curriculum best suited to their children.

The following subsections illuminate the literature pertaining to academics-based curriculum, play-based curriculum, play in contrast with structure, concerns associated with play, developmentally appropriate practice, and parents’ beliefs about play. Because parents enroll their children in these programs, school personnel must highlight how their institutions can provide a curriculum that best fits their needs. Informing parents about various early childhood education programs available in their locality is beneficial; they must be aware of the learning philosophies and teaching methods of the teachers because of their impact on children (West, 1993).

**Academics-Based Curriculum**

Educational policies emphasizing the importance of academic training constitute the main framework in the design of school curricula despite the importance of the affective domain, which was part of a system published in 1965 for identifying, understanding, and addressing how people learn (Nutbrown, 2002). Educational policy makers have been responsive to surveys that highlighted the shortcomings of the skills of
students; therefore, intellectual goals remain the priority because of the continuous importance placed on academic achievement (Nutbrown, 2002). Less emphasis has been placed on the best way to reach those goals.

The divergence between intellectual achievement and the affective domain has complicated the design of educational policies as well as the strategies in place at many schools (Nutbrown, 2002). Achieving a balance has been the greatest challenge of all. Other elements critical to the foundation of the design are the beliefs and attitudes of parents.

The concern over the quality of preparation needed by young children before enrolling in preschool has come from parents; teachers have not typically shared the same expectations (West, 1993). Teachers basically know that young children come to school with very little preparation; their job is to introduce them to the basics of language, letters, and numbers during the time that they spend in school (Bennett, Wood, & Rogers, 1998). Parents have emphasized the need to ready their child for preschool through home activities and role playing. Although parents’ beliefs and attitudes have contributed to success in school, their influence may have also placed unnecessary pressure on the child. Few parents include the preschool curriculum as a deciding factor when they look for preschools for their children (Stipek & Seal, 2001). At best, they consider it only when they have already enrolled their children in a certain school. Many preschools are in operation, each with its own program and curriculum; and parents are always welcome to ask about the programs and the classroom treatment of their children (Kirk & Anicich, 1996). At many preschools parents are welcome to observe classes so they can acquire
an understanding of the learning environment in the school, but most parents who observe classes do not focus on the curriculum. They pay more attention to how good and kind the teacher is, how modern the facilities are, and whether their child will be given the attention he or she requires during classes (Stipek & Seal, 2001).

Another survey (Saracho, 2002) revealed that parents often asked how soon their child would be able to read and inquired about the achievement rates of the students in terms of reading and mastery of academic skills. Parents also heavily emphasized a desire for their child to learn how to solve problems and to learn about geography and culture (Saracho, 2002). This may indicate that parents often prefer academics-based curricula or traditional schools because of the emphasis placed on improving academic skills and performance.

Academics-based curricula, or those in which children are taught numbers and letters and reading through the use of worksheets, have been a popular component of almost all preschool programs (MacNaughton & Williams, 2009). The emphasis on learning numbers and letters has resulted from the competitive nature of formal school standards and standardized testing. Parents often demand that their children be taught these skills in preparation for kindergarten. With the emphasis on academic achievement and grades, it is no wonder that many parents feel that the academics-based curriculum is what preschools should be about (MacNaughton & Williams, 2009). Even though studies have repeatedly shown that the use of worksheets is developmentally inappropriate for children in preschool because the cognitive and motor abilities of young children are not
developed sufficiently to work successfully on worksheet tasks, skill instruction through worksheets and drills continues to be an integral component of preschool programs.

**Play-Based Curriculum**

The significance of play in child development did not emerge until the late 20th century largely because of the earlier collective view that play is an activity nonessential to the majority of development (Athey, 1984). Increased literature and research dedicated to play have suggested that this activity, in fact, serves important functions in cognition, language, and social interaction, rendering it central to development from infancy onward (Athey, 1984).

Play is universally considered to be an optimum part of child development and a fundamental right of a child by the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights (Fisher, Hirsch-Pasek, Golinkoff, & Gryfe, 2008). But what is play? No single recognized definition of play exists, but one of the most often quoted definitions by K. H. Rubin, Fein, and Vandenburg (1983) provided the primary characteristics of play as a behavior that is (a) intrinsically motivated, (b) controlled by those playing, (c) concerned with process rather than product, (d) nonliteral, (e) free of externally imposed rules, and (f) characterized by the active engagement of those playing.

Play takes several forms (Hurwitz, 2003). Practice play involves repetition and is done purely for the pleasure and enjoyment of children; for example, playing in the sandbox, playing on the swings or slides, or engaging in anything that children do repeatedly to have fun. Constructive play occurs when children create something out of materials, such as building structures with blocks, sticks, or Lego pieces. Dramatic play
or make-believe play is play in which children take the role of a person, real or imagined, or pretend to be an object. Rough-and-tumble play requires laughter and acceptable physical activity. Games with rules involve play in which children must follow a set of regulations (Hewes, 2008).

According to Fisher, Hirsch-Pasek, Golinkoff, and Gryfe (2008) scientists and researchers have supported play as a promoter of children’s social, emotional, and cognitive development. Through play children are able to unravel their uncertainties pertaining to the world by testing how objects function. For instance, when a child is provided an unfamiliar toy to play with or a toy that promotes curiosity, the first thing he or she does is to discover how it works through exploratory play. The child then progresses to symbolic play, where he or she role plays and exercises imagination during play. Symbolic play, such as pretending to be a fairy princess or pretending a banana is a telephone, engages the child’s imagination and creativity. This type of play offers cognitive advantages to the child, such as abstract thinking, perspective-taking, symbolic representation, literacy, language, and memory. Play also enhances the social development of children. Social play encourages children to interact with others, cooperate willingly with other children, and follow rules. Fantasy play builds social competences and becomes a coping strategy for children. All these benefits attributed to play have converged into what is called a “play-learning” philosophy, grounded in the supposition that “play, in its many forms, represents a natural, age-appropriate method for children to explore and learn about themselves and the world around them” (Singer &
Singer as cited in Fisher et al., 2008, p. 308). Play builds skills and consequently provides a strong foundation for higher-order cognitive tasks and academic success.

The play-based curriculum was founded on the belief that play is the most appropriate method of teaching children in their early years (Frost, Wortham, & Reifel, 2008). This curriculum has been endorsed by preschool educators because it is arguably the most appropriate learning environment for young children; it supports their need for exploration, discovery, and attention. For most educators, play-based curriculum is a necessity in preschool programs in concert with other learning activities (McMullen, Buldu, Lash, & Alat, 2004). Interest in the play-based curriculum, however, has declined as an increasing number of parents have demanded that their children are introduced to skills such as writing, reading, and counting; moreover, parents have difficulty understanding what a play-based curriculum is and how it encourages learning and discovery. Parents are uncomfortable with the term play because it connotes aimless activities without the benefit of any learning (Fromberg, 1998). Much of the misperception surrounding play-based curricula is brought about by the low value that parents place on play.

The play-based curriculum can be explained in that it operates through the principle of teacher-directed and child-initiated activities (Wood, 2004). In essence, “learning through play is not left to chance but is channeled through complex and reciprocal relationships; it is situated in activities which are socially constructed and mediated” (Wood, 2004, p. 34). The challenge lies in the process as well as in the
strategy that incorporates the subject disciplines in the activities; in this context play is not merely about activity but includes the art of making this strategy effective.

According to Wood (2004), the strength of play-based pedagogy is that it supports characteristics of effective pedagogy: “sustained shared thinking, joint involvement, and co-construction” (p. 21). Play-based pedagogies have been endorsed by early childhood educators, but the challenge of effective implementation remains. In addition to the concerns of the content of the curricula, finding the balance between adult-directed activities and the self-initiated activities of the children is difficult. The teachers and the school need to be able to incorporate these two approaches to devise quality play that works in the required context of accountability, performance, and achievement.

To appreciate the evolution of play as an important practice in early childhood education, familiarity with its theoretical foundations is necessary. Support for play in education derives from Piagetian and constructivist theories. Relevant frameworks supporting play are found in sociocultural and activity theories, especially with regard to play as it can affect behaviors and eventually the child’s learning (Wood, 2004). Furthermore, “substantial evidence [has shown] that through play, children demonstrate improved verbal communication, high levels of social and interaction skills, creative use of play materials, imaginative and divergent thinking skills, and problem solving capabilities” (Wood, 2004, p. 21).

Play-based curricula involve more than play. Although the main component of the learning experience is accommodated through play, the activities and learning stations designed for optimum learning involve carefully planned activities that encourage
learning through play (Grossman, 2004). Children playing with blocks and putting puzzles together learn about relationships, size, shapes, and coordination (Duncan & Tarulli, 2003). In addition, their fine motor skills are developed and enhanced, preparing them to grasp and control the pencils and crayons that are used in later learning. Children who work with paints learn about relationships, colors, and cause and effect. Learning to read, write, and count is not achieved simply by rote learning; if parents and teachers want the best learning environment for their children, then learning these skills should be incorporated into play (Elkind, 2007).

Play is not so simple as it may seem; when parents dismiss play as purely a leisure activity, they fail to consider that play entails a complex exchange of ideas and behavior between one child and another or between a child and a toy (Elkind, 2007). When young children engage in solitary play, they have the opportunity to explore a toy and to learn on their own (Atfield & Wood, 1996; McCune & Zanes, 2001). When a child plays with other children, he or she learns how to negotiate, compromise, and share with other children as well as discover that other children have different views and experiences (Kim, 1999). Play is hardly simple: It engages the senses, cognitive process, and emotions of the child. Puzzles, dolls, and pretend play involve critical thinking, creativity, and imagination, which are all critical in cognitive development (Christie, 2001).

The play-based curriculum is suited for all young children; it offers both the structure and the flexibility that children need. Playing is not harmful to children; it is enjoyable, entertaining, and effective in introducing them to new concepts and ideas
(Berk, 2001). Because the activities and learning stations in play-based classrooms have been developed in accordance with cognitive, affective, and social skills, children who attend play-based preschools can be expected to be better adjusted and have better social skills than those who attend traditional preschools (Jones & Cooper, 2006).

The source of confusion and possible aversion to play as a learning method is that play is regarded by some as synonymous with activities that exist purely for purposeless enjoyment. Parents and teachers alike sometimes fail to realize that play engages young children more than anything else in the classroom or even in their daily lives (Clayton, 2007). Through play children learn about their world, their environment, and the people with whom they interact; they build social skills that are important as they grow older. Children also learn to make use of their fine motor skills, their imagination, and creativity during play. In an interview with play-based teachers dealing with the resistance of parents and administrators to the model, a number of teachers reported that they lacked support from their principals; furthermore, these teachers stated that they had grown weary of their principals’ comments during classroom observations. They explained that when using play during classroom instruction, their principals asked them when the children would do the real work (Neuman & Roskos, 1997). Some principals apparently did not view play as a learning medium and, therefore, deemed it unnecessary for classroom instruction despite research showing that children who enjoy what they do are less at risk for stress and develop a love for learning (Wilcox-Herzog, 2002). Previous learning experiences become the basis for future learning and the attitudes about learning
that children form. The goal of educators is to provide a positive learning experience so that children will come to love learning (Fleer, 2009).

Play is a process that totally engages young participants, and the play classroom offers endless possibilities. Children’s natural curiosity about the world around them keeps them involved. The longer children persist in an activity, the more they discover. Repeated successful experiences result in confidence of skill mastery, and play participants learn on many levels. Young children thrive on play that is spontaneous and responsive instead of goal driven. Whether children are alone or socially engaged, their play evolves through exploration, connection, and sometimes stillness. One of the most interesting elements of play is actually what predetermines it, that is, what must be in place before play can evolve and live (Jones & Cooper, 2006). For example, “Experiences with playdough allow children to explore and experiment in varied ways. Learning occurs in social, emotional, language, physical, and cognitive domains. All help to provide children a solid foundation for future schooling” (Swartz 2005, p. 100). Observing children enjoying playdough reveals an abundance of cognitive meaning, everything from smiles to fine motor skills and conversation to a sense of trust, humor, and a developing sense of self.

Because children love to build and construct, the center with building blocks in an early childhood classroom is typically occupied. Creation of rows and piles is common by age three (Reifel, 1984), and this building scenario is representative of developmentally appropriate play. Children at this age may not carry out a design from start to finish; however, they possess a plan sometimes independent of the actual blocks.
One may observe children constructing a shelter to protect animals or a garage for their cars. Children often spend all of their time in the block center building a tower only to knock it down, learning cause and effect. “Thoughtfully prepared, a water center . . . can foster cognitive development, teach mathematics and science concepts, enhance physical skills, promote social learning and cooperative effort, and enrich language experiences” (Crosser 1994, p. 28).

Other forms of play, such as drama, role playing, art sessions, and music, also encourage the development of the brain and cognitive abilities, which are very useful when children commence formal schooling (Berk, Mann, & Ogan, 2006). Children demonstrate their learning and mastery through play; they imitate what they see in a nonthreatening environment. In early childhood, children engage in imaginative play to try out new songs, dances, and stories (Graue, Kroeger, & Brown, 2003). Play also supports diversity and cultural differences as children are introduced to the rich and diverse cultural traditions of other races (Abbott, 1994). Play-based curricula seem to be too good to be true—one of the reasons that it is often unpopular with parents—but given appropriate teacher training, sufficient resources, learning stations, and adequate materials and facilities, play-based curricula would offer the best learning environment for preschool children (Grossman, 2004).

**Benefits of a play-based early childhood curriculum.** Beliefs and attitudes concerning the way children learn can range from the fundamentals of cognitive development to discourse on learning theory. Frost, Wortham, and Reifel’s (2008) work in these areas has played an important role in the formation of education theories,
particularly in how best to formulate instructional strategies based on an understanding of
the way children learn; however, common beliefs about learning have been typically
associated with formal schooling environment, thus eliminating, or minimizing the
impact of learning channels even before the child steps into a school. The formative
years of human development are crucial for more than one reason (Bronson, 2001; Kopp,
1991). These early formative years serve as a period when self-regulation develops,
including many key aspects pertinent to life, for example, impulse and emotion control,
self-guidance of thought and behavior, planning, self-reliance, and socially responsible
behavior (Bronson, 2001; Kopp, 1991). Self-regulation is reflected in the preschool years
as children show signs of patience by refraining from running after desired objects or by
offering help to other children. Achieving self-regulation at an early age can thus equip
children to meet complex challenges, which range from the day-to-day academic and
social requirements of school to decision making on larger social issues in the later years
(Frost et al., 2008).

Formation of balanced self-regulation depends heavily on the quality of external
stimuli because early childhood is also the “high season” of imaginative play (Singer &
Singer, 1990), a time when children dwell on make-believe situations more than at any
other time in their lives. Vygotsky (1962) also identified make-believe play as one of the
prime catalysts of human development. Other researchers like Bronson (2001) and
Eisenberg, Smith, Sadovsky, and Spinrad (2004) have thus identified self-regulation as
the crowning achievement of early childhood.
When children are engaged in any form of play, whether make-believe, pretend play, or are listening to stories presented in a playful manner, they become receptive to learning concepts and forming relationships (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2008). Believing that worksheets are not developmentally appropriate for young children, Grossman (2002) stated that when children are asked to complete worksheets or exercises and drills, engagement diminishes; furthermore, worksheets have only one right answer and when children are not sure about the answer, they stop taking risks. In addition, Kamii (1985) stated that “worksheets encourage obedience, passivity, and the mechanical application of techniques” (p. 120). This natural and integrated relationship between play and children’s development has always drawn the attention of researchers. In 1991 a well-established consensus among the professionals engaged in preschool proceedings (Alliance for Childhood, National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education [NAECS/SDE]) (Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1992) is that play in early childhood is the most beneficial instrument for cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and moral development, irrespective of children’s socioeconomic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds (Ginsburg et al., 2007; Elkind, 2007; Zigler & Bishop-Josef, 2006). Play is the universal language of young children, who regardless of culture and socioeconomic status, have been observed to play with one another, communicate, and interact. This would mean that play does not have to be language specific, nor does it need to be culturally sensitive. Instead, it can be a valuable medium for universal learning.
Although the definition of play suggests a certain lack of structure, a play-based curriculum includes nothing that resembles aimless activities; instead play provides a tool that allows teachers to exploit the power of children’s developing ideas, interests, and competencies (Weis, 1999). Play cannot be an element isolated from the main curriculum: It should enable children to develop the knowledge and skills necessary for successful citizenship in their later years. A play-based curriculum involves more than letting children play, so it must be carefully designed to foster the integration of learning goals.

**Play vs. structured activities.** The curricula and instructional approaches to the teaching of young children have been numerous and varied, often reflecting the educational reform or policy of the country or state. For example, the present emphasis on academic excellence and accountability has resulted in early childhood educators teaching skills and concepts that are not developmentally appropriate (E. B. Freeman & Hatch, 1989).

The results of a survey of early childhood teachers in the US revealed that most childcare centers were privately owned and for-profit and that the number of public school programs had increased. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the teacher–student ratios are more favorable in centers run by religious and community groups than by private individuals (Boland, 2010). Statistics showed that most teachers were Caucasian and had attained a college degree, but type of degree and qualifications varied for each center. The majority of children in these centers were ethnically diverse (Saluja, Early, & Clifford, 2002); this finding suggests that preschools
are run by private individuals or groups that may or may not adopt appropriate practices. They cater primarily to the expectations of parents; for example, a preschool originally adopting the HighScope (2014) approach, described as active learning, whether planned by adults or initiated by children, where children learn through direct, hands-on experiences with people, objects, events, and ideas, would later incorporate academics into its program because parents demanded that their children have academically oriented lessons. Because preschools are unregulated by any government agency in terms of program offerings and standards, many administrators have not hesitated to tailor programs to the demands of the parents despite developmental appropriateness. For instance, Sisson (2011) found that public preschool teachers were often challenged with regard to play in the preschool classroom, resulting in the compromise of some philosophical beliefs as they adopted a more standardized curriculum and measurement practices.

Developmental theories, especially those regarding cognitive development, emphasize young children’s lack of preparation to absorb abstract information and their short attention spans, both of which hamper their learning (Marcon, 2002). Teaching overly abstract concepts to young children, which occurs during formal instruction, can negatively affect their self-esteem; they often fail in tasks for which they are not yet developmentally ready. In a longitudinal study of preschool children, Marcon (2002) revealed that children who experienced academically driven preschool curricula had lower rates of retention and poorer grades than children who were in a child-initiated preschool program. Such findings have not prevented preschool personnel from
following academically focused curricula; in fact, literacy, reading, and numbers were found to be emphasized at a majority of preschools (Marcon, 2002).

Several studies (Chang, Stipek, & Garza, 2006; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Singer, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2006) have provided evidence that structured, teacher-directed models of teaching fail to stimulate interest in children and are consequently ineffective in creating academic success, but techniques allowing children’s self-initiated activities and interests produce positive results. Researchers have also voiced concerns over the possibility that overuse of didactic teaching can suppress child-initiated learning, undermining young children’s self-confidence and motivation to learn.

Grossman (2004) asserted that very young children focus on emotional security, pointing out that didactic processes of learning at this stage are not developmentally appropriate because of the emotional vulnerability of very young children. Didactic instruction can be problematic for children and discourage their assertiveness and risk taking. Hindering a child’s risk-taking ability compromises problem-solving skills because the latter involves an element of risk. Grossman (2004) also noted that the opportunities afforded in a play-based curriculum cannot be found in a teacher-centered classroom because play-based learning centers on providing wide opportunities for learning and building skills through real, meaningful situations. In response to criticism that play-based learning is not evidence-based learning, Grossman (2004) countered that learning without worksheets can be demonstrated with individual portfolios created by each child and containing samples of the child’s works, the observations of the teachers, and other checklists that could record progress and skills developed.
That play raises every competency important to school success has gained acceptance as evidenced by the increase in the amount of supporting empirical evidence (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002; Singer et al., 2006). For example, researchers have already established that high-quality pretend play is related to children’s ability to think abstractly and to evaluate ideas from the perspectives of others (Bergen, 2002; Berk et al., 2006; Curran, 1999; Singer et al., 2003). In addition, researchers have also documented the connections between the complexity of children’s pretend play and early literacy, mathematical thinking, and problem-solving (Singer et al., 2006; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990; Van Hoorn, Nourot, Scales, & Alward, 2006).

Shonkoff and Phillips (2000) presented three basic reflections that serve as clues to the process of development taking place when children are at play: (a) Children are exposed to opportunities to use their imagination; (b) they are able to incorporate social, physical, emotional, and intellectual skills for their development; and 3) motivation to learn is high, leading children to become actively engaged in the learning process.

The reflections above point to the possibility that when children are in their favored environment, they grasp and retain more skills and concepts than those passed on to them through didactic patterns of teaching. In addition, children may excel when they are able to develop new concepts through activities that occur naturally to them (Trawick-Smith & Picard, 2003). This premise returns play to the forefront: Play can foster these activities by providing such tasks as counting, sorting, sequencing, predicting, hypothesizing, or evaluating. They meet those challenges with a motivated state of mind because they are playing, and during the play process the children perceive
the significance of such tasks and stretch themselves to master them (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, & Eyer, 2003).

Because of scientific support for play-based learning, researchers have recommended policies that make play fundamental to learning in preschools. Researchers and child advocates have suggested emphasizing play and child-centered activities in the preschool curriculum, increasing funding for research and training to improve incorporation of play in the cognitive development of children, familiarizing parents with the merits of play and its role in their child’s cognitive development, and continually assessing and documenting observations about children while at play (Tepperman, 2007).

Concerns associated with play-based learning. Play-based curricula have been integrated into progressive preschools in the United States with the growing awareness of play as an excellent medium in which children learn and explore their world; however, the misunderstanding about what the play-based curriculum is about and why it is essential for young children has deep historical roots (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Infant schools were imported to America from Great Britain in the mid-1820s as a way to help working mothers care for their young children as well as a means of improving education (Vinovskis, 1993). Even then, parents were especially skeptical about the play-based curricula, often demanding that their children be taught letters and numbers at preschool. Some infant school teachers stressed play and deemphasized intellectual pursuits, while others immediately tried to teach the alphabet and reading. Often, it was the parents who insisted that infant schools stress rigid classroom discipline and
teach their children how to read. Indeed, many infant school instructors who opposed teaching two- and three-year-old children how to read were forced to do so under pressure from the parents. As we shall see, this debate over how very young children should be educated came to play an important role in the eventual demise of the infant schools. (Vinovskis, 1993, p. 56)

Overall, support for play in school has been based on studies that demonstrate how play simulates many human functions, thus furthering a child’s development. According to Stephens (2009), play enables the development of a child’s full potential because it nurtures development overall. Despite broad support for play in academe, full support for it has been hindered by the perception that play is a distraction from the perceived important points, priorities, and intellectual goals of early child education and that academic achievement alone translates to success. Although one cannot say that achievement and success are unrelated, those who believe so have overlooked the other needs of children, especially in terms of developing their other intelligences. In a theory of multiple intelligences, Gardner (1983) proposed that intelligent behavior does not arise from a single unitary quality of the mind but instead that different kinds of intelligence are generated from separate symbols. Each of these symbols enables the individual to solve problems that are valued within a cultural setting (Gardner, 1983). No two individuals have precisely the same profile of intelligences, not even identical twins; thus, teachers, business professionals, or parents may assume that every person’s profile differs from theirs as well as from that of every other person (Gardner, 2000). Throughout most of human history, differences among individuals have been considered a nuisance factor
in educational circles. Uniformity in schools and identical treatment of each student have been favored; moreover, this “equal treatment” appears on the surface to be fair because no favoritism has apparently been shown; however, such supposedly uniform schools are actually unfair (Gardner, 2000)

Another challenge is that not all play initiatives have been successful. Initiating play in the early education classroom may be easy in terms of encouraging the interests of the children; however, learning has been disappointing in some cases, particularly if the concept has not been effectively translated into classroom practice. In such cases, play in the classroom results in mere play, the way a child plays at home.

Another argument was raised by Guha (1987), who stated that some believe that play is simply a routine for children:

Play is part and parcel of children’s natural behavior embedded in their day-to-day spontaneous living. It forms an important part of pre-school and out-of-school early learning. The school has to acknowledge it and build on it, but the school’s function is different. Although the learning which accompanies day-to-day living and play may be uniquely valuable to the individual, it also has several drawbacks. It is haphazard, fragmentary, and because it is unplanned, it may lack direction. (p. 57)

Wood (2004) asserted that teachers have also acknowledged the difference between theory and practice with regard to play in the classroom, citing a study in which teachers compared instances of their actual practice in the classroom to the theory of play and found that the two did not coincide. Admittedly, teachers stated instances in which
they over or underestimated the competencies of the children, a scenario which would also be frustrating for the students.

The teachers identified limitations as follows: (a) pressures and expectations from parents, colleagues, and school inspectors; (b) lack of time for adult involvement; (c) the structure of the school day (timetable, fixed times for school assemblies and outdoor play); (d) downward pressures associated with the national curriculum; and (e) the emphasis on literacy and numeracy (Wood, 2004).

The complications created by these restrictions have given rise to the perception that play-based curricula may be less effective than academic-based curricula. In addition, parents may think that through play their child is not gaining a proper education, especially because education is primarily focused on academics and literacy. Even though play is normal in early childhood education programs, the amount of it that is integrated may be questioned because contemporary parents have been exposed to other educational strategies that place more emphasis on academic and intellectual development than on the multidisciplinary aspect of development.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice

In addition to state accountability measures and standards, the field of early childhood education also has a national organization that aims to assure quality at this level. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is the organization representing the educational needs of young American children; its members work closely with federal agencies in the promotion and evaluation of early childhood education programs. NAEYC members advocated for the development of
developmentally appropriate preschool and kindergarten programs; consequently, they undertook the accreditation of preschools meeting their quality standards. Parents should be well aware that accredited preschools have the highest standards, rules, and regulations found to be most beneficial to children 0 to 8 years old.

The NAEYC position statement indicates that preschools should adopt curricula that are well-planned, challenging, developmentally appropriate, culturally and linguistically responsive, and comprehensive; they should promote the well-being of all children. NAEYC sets the standard by which preschools should be evaluated, but despite its leadership in early childhood education, preschools generally adopt their own curriculum according to state standards. A discrepancy exists, however, in what is deemed appropriate practice for preschools as advocated by NAEYC and the current preschool programs available in the US.

The NAEYC has advocated access to developmentally appropriate curricula for all children in preschool; thus, preschool programs should focus on the totality of the child’s development and not only on one or two aspects. In this regard, programs in which emphasis is placed solely upon academics, play, or life skills are not in accordance with the NAEYC mandate. Developmentally appropriate activities facilitate the active exploration of the child’s interactions with adults, other children, and learning materials (Bredekamp, 2009).

Developmentally appropriate curricula provide children with the opportunity to work with other children in groups or to engage in individual activities; moreover, children can initiate, direct, and practice skills at any given time. Materials, activities,
and games that are concrete and relevant to children are provided in a learning environment that favors unstructured thinking. In addition, developmentally appropriate practices are based on developmental and cognitive theories that help to inform the best methods for teaching young children (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). The term *developmentally appropriate* indicates that learning experiences are geared toward the cognitive, social, and psychological orientation of the child in the knowledge that these practices cultivate the best conditions for the learning of young children.

Given that developmentally appropriate practices are mandated by early childhood education advocates, surprisingly few preschool programs adhere to these provisions; instead, they emphasize academic instruction and focus on the demands of state laws, policies, and standardized testing (Bridge, 2001). Even with the existence of empirically validated curricula, many kindergarten teachers are required to use curricula that provide first priority to teaching subjects, relegating developmental needs to a secondary position (New, Mardell, & Robinson, 2005). Numerous requirements involve standardized tests. Early childhood and primary teachers generally support the need for developmentally appropriate practice, but because of the focus on specific scores from standardized tests, they are often prevented from doing what is best for students (Bredekamp & Shepard, 1989). Evidence has also shown that many early childhood teachers choose developmentally inappropriate practices even without mandates (Bergen, 2002). Bredekamp (1987) stated that developmentally inappropriate programs include teacher-directed, large-group, structured learning activities. Instructional strategies that include whole-group lectures, paper-and-pencil workbook exercises, and silent work at
individually assigned seats are also inappropriate. When children are forced to work on learning tasks in the manner that older children do, it places them in a precarious position in which they will come to perceive learning as tedious, difficult, frustrating, and stressful (Bredekamp, 1987). When young children develop negative attitudes about learning, they are likely to hold negative views of learning; they are at risk for underachievement and may form a false sense of what learning should be. Coupled with inappropriate practices, parents also contribute to the undue stress of preschool learning by pitting one child against another, creating unnecessary competition that sets the child up to become competitive (Cannella, 1997).

Developmentally inappropriate practices have been found to cause stress in administrators, teachers, and children. In a study of kindergarten practices in Ohio, Hatch and Freeman (1988) reported that children were not the only ones affected by an inappropriate focus on academic skills. Teachers, principals, and supervisors were also found to be victims of stress because of the increased potential for student failure. Children, especially at the preschool age, do not have the cognitive skills to learn and master academic content such as reading and writing; thus, that children would fail standardized exams is likely (McMullen & Lash, 2004). Legislation against academic achievement tests, including those given in kindergarten, should be passed, because they are unneeded. Wiedey and Lichtenstein (1987) found that of seven student stressors reported by kindergarten teachers, developmentally inappropriate academic tasks caused the second most severe symptoms in students. In addition, Burts et al. (1993) found that more stress-related behaviors are exhibited in classrooms where developmentally
inappropriate activities take place than in classrooms where the activities are developmentally appropriate.

Developmentally inappropriate programs result in missed opportunities for optimal learning. When children are tasked with activities and materials ill-suited to their cognitive abilities, they develop adverse reactions to the materials. Those who are forced to read might fail to develop a love of reading; the kinds of attitudes that the child should have developed toward learning are thus altered (Gomez, Stone, & Kroeger, 2004). Based on Piagetian understanding of the way children learn, one may conclude that programs emphasizing single-subject teaching with an emphasis on academics reduce opportunities for growth in other areas (Peck, McCraig, & Sapp, 1999). Programs that classify information in discrete categories provide learning experiences typically used with adults, not young children (Elkind, 1987). Children learn differently from adults, and Piaget, who was a cognitivist, believed that children learn best through play. For young children play is the means by which they interact with other children and with objects designed to teach them about the world. If learning activities fail to incorporate play or account for the manner in which young children learn, then those activities are deemed developmentally inappropriate.

Certification does not necessarily qualify a teacher to provide developmentally appropriate experiences. Bredekamp (2009) reported that teachers are certified in many states as qualified to teach 4- and 5-year-olds regardless of related specialized training or supervised experiences with children in this age group. According to Granucci (1990) in many states the scope of certification is kindergarten through Grade 3 or kindergarten
through Grade 6 with little emphasis placed on planning and implementing the curriculum for kindergarten, leaving teachers inadequately prepared for planning an effective program, which results in the pushing down of philosophies, curricula, and methods from the upper grade levels. Granucci further stated that with teacher certification extending from kindergarten to Grades 6 or 8, states run the risk of hiring certified kindergarten teachers without field experience with kindergarten children. Such policies may have resulted in the increasing focus on academics in kindergarten programs.

An Educational Research Services study (1986) of kindergarten teachers’ perceptions of the primary focus of the program reflected inconsistencies from certification to practice. The results of this nationwide study of 1,082 kindergarten teachers showed that 8.1% of the respondents focused on child development while 62.9% focused on academic readiness (Pajares, 1992). Elkind (1987) reported similar conflicts between kindergarten teachers’ practices and what is actually appropriate for young children. One may surmise that teachers focus on academic development instead of on what is appropriate for children perhaps as a result of the heavy emphasis on teaching academic skills instead of life skills. Most teacher training is geared toward increasing academic performance as measured by statewide tests and accountability measures (Pajares, 1992).

Developmentally appropriate practices emphasize play, exploration, and discovery in the classroom; in fact, the most salient example of developmentally appropriate practice in the education of young children is the play-based curriculum. The
next section provides an explanation of the play-based curriculum, showing why it is the most appropriate for the education of young children. Related studies on preschools and the play-based curriculum as well as the attitudes of parents, teachers, and administrators about the curriculum model are also covered.

Parents’ Beliefs About Play-Based Early Childhood Education

A crucial aspect of early childhood education is the role of parents as determined by their attitudes toward the learning and development processes of children. Parents’ beliefs are a vital component in a child’s development (Harkness & Super, 1997). Their involvement in childhood development is not limited only to childrearing practices; they also reflect upon, plan, and assess the decisions they make for their children, target particular objectives or goals that they feel their children should achieve, and select methods to achieve these goals. In addition, they also theorize about their roles as parents and the nature and disposition of children. Their theorizing is most often done unconsciously but has the effect of indirectly determining their children’s outcomes.

Parents’ beliefs have been described as “the sets of ideas that parents hold about the nature of children’s socialization” (Mills, 2009, p. 188). Beliefs is a term often used interchangeably with parents’ thoughts, ideas, constructs, ethnotheories, and representations. Essentially, what parents think is best for their children form part of their belief system. In a sense, this parental belief system constitutes some sort of “folk theory,” a raw psychological interpretation made by parents about themselves and how their children behave, learn, and develop (Mills, 2009). These beliefs result from parents’ dynamic and active construction of various experiences. Because construction is
a processual activity, parents’ beliefs do not manifest themselves as closed systems. They change over time as a consequence of multiple experiences; moreover, beliefs are not entirely separate from other domains of social cognition. Beliefs interact with and are influenced by several factors, such as culture and age.

The two main competing views on parental belief systems are the constructivist and the cultural (Harkness & Super, 1997). According to the former, parents’ beliefs are self-constructed: views of parents regarding the nature of their child’s development are dependent upon how they make sense of both their experiences and cultural norms surrounding child rearing and parenting. The latter has also been recognized in the field of child learning. Harkness and Super (1997) stated:

Parents’ belief systems are related both to more general cultural belief systems and to the particular experiences of raising individual children in a specific time and place; they represent a convergence of the public and the private, the shared and the personal. (p. 17)

According to the constructivist view the belief systems of parents are modified from time to time as a result of the multiple experiences parents share with their children. Parents adjust their “internal representations” about their roles as parents according to the demands of culture and as a response to daily experiences in a specific place and time. Harkness and Super (1997) noted that parents’ representations or constructs change and are reorganized usually as a result of dramatic economic and social upheaval.

Until the time of this writing, the manner in which parents’ belief systems were influenced by demographic and social variables was unclear despite the existence of
studies that supported the influence (Mills, 2009). Some have theorized, however, that
the existence of different belief systems present in groupings based on gender, race, or
communities possibly explains why research studies indicate that parents’ beliefs are
significantly related to social variables. For example, as a result of differences in beliefs
about education, confidence in children, and intelligence, parents may have differing
belief structures regarding children’s learning and development. Differences in parents’
belief systems can then be used to explain why so many studies of parents’ aspirations for
their children are related to demographic variables.

Parents are a crucial component in a child’s life, and their role significantly
influences development in the early years. The family is the main social network and
first learning environment for young children. According to Parker, Boak, Griffin,
Ripple, and Peay (1999), when parents are involved with their young children, the latter
adjust better to school. Adults, including parents, possess many skills that scaffold their
children’s learning through everyday interactions (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2008).

A significant aspect of parents’ beliefs about childhood learning and education is
their understanding and appreciation of play. The majority of parents believe that a play
approach is the best method for imparting early childhood education (Qadiri & Manhas,
2009). Although parents may admit that children learn through play they prefer an
academic based curriculum to provide the essential skills needed to enter kindergarten or
first grade. Although researchers and scientists have reiterated that play is a vital
component in early childhood development, literature actually covering parents’ attitudes
and beliefs about play and play-based learning is scarce. Extant studies from academic and educational databases were exploratory.

Political leaders have advocated school choice plans to promote competition and increase accountability in public education, starting in elementary school (Maddaus, 1990). With such an emphasis on academic achievement in today’s society, disagreement has arisen with regard to the best means to teach young children, but the drive to teach young children advanced skills, such as reading and writing, has increased (Singer et al., 2006). Many early education models and programs based on differing philosophies have been promulgated; consequently, parents often have difficulty deciding on proper placement for their child. In general, parents genuinely want their children to succeed and to be at the top of their class, motivating them to choose programs focused primarily on academics (Hirsch-Pasek & Golinkoff, Singer, Berk 2008).

Harkness and Super (1997) noted what parents believe about play and its contributions influence their expectations for the preschool curriculum. Parents’ beliefs include not only goals and expectations but also timetables and specific aspects of development that the preschool curriculum must address.

Theory and research positively support play and play-based learning, but literature is lacking in terms of parent perception of play and its role in preparing their children for academic success. Sigel and McGillicuddy-De Lisi (2002) stated that the beliefs of parents about a child’s learning process are impacted by personal experiences unique to their culture. For instance, if a mother believes that the best way to educate her child is through direct instruction, her belief was most likely influenced by her own
experiences as a child growing up, by a cultural emphasis on didactic styles of teaching, and by personal observations of the process of learning.

Determining parents’ beliefs about child development and about a child’s learning process is important because these beliefs influence the child’s developmental outcomes. Blevins-Knabe and Musun-Miller (1996) showed that parents who had a positive attitude toward math were most likely to engage their children actively in math-related activities and were more supportive of their children’s math endeavors than other parents. Those who placed importance on learning math and who believed that they played an important role in their children’s appreciation for mathematics were found to devote more time to math-related activities with their children than other parents.

In a similar study Donahue, Pearl, and Hertzog (as cited in Fisher et al., 2008) found that maternal beliefs about the development of oral language determined maternal behaviors when engaged in communication tasks with children. Sigel and McGillicuddy-De Lisi (2002) discovered that parents’ beliefs indirectly influence child development. Parents’ beliefs “organize children’s everyday living contexts from the objects found in the home environment (e.g., toys) to their daily routines and social interactions” (Fisher et al., 2008, p. 308). Hence, behaviors related to parenting seem to be influenced by the way a parent perceives a particular behavior and its benefits to the child. Theories and psychological discussions have generally pointed to the importance of parental beliefs in shaping child development, but the beliefs of parents about play-based learning have remained relatively unexplored in the research on child development. The studies above noted related to parents’ beliefs and play-based learning are exploratory at best; however,
they are helpful in providing a preliminary look at how the perceptions of parents regarding the nature of play and the effectiveness of play-based learning differ across culture and contexts.

Corter and Pelletier (1995) conducted a study to investigate the perceptions of parents and educators on the preschool curriculum and current practices in Canada. The researchers gathered data from focus-group discussions and surveys of parents and teachers as well as reviews of document associated with preschool programs. The findings revealed that both parents and educators were confident that a play-based and child-centered preschool curriculum was the most effective practice in promoting early childhood development; however, some parents also expressed approval of the current practice of incorporating more academics.

A comprehensive study done by Fisher et al. (2008) revealed the beliefs of American mothers regarding play-based learning and their preferences for the way preschool education should be delivered to their children. Their findings derived from two studies, which involved 1,130 American mothers and 99 preschool educators. Study 1 involved investigating mothers’ beliefs about play and the learning that can be derived from it. The study showed that mothers had differing conceptions of play. Some mothers believed that play consisted of activities that are unstructured but goal-oriented and require the use of the imagination. Some mothers considered only unstructured activities as playful; others were generally uncertain about what play is. The majority of the mothers attributed learning value to play but attributed learning only to those activities that fit their descriptions of play. Generally, more learning value was credited
to structured (field trips, museums) compared to unstructured activities (free play, expressive play). Study 2 delineated the way educators and parents defined play. Educators considered structured activities nonplay activities and ascribed less learning value to them, and they rated the learning value of unstructured activities higher in their position in early childhood education.

A study conducted by Morrow and Rand (1991) showed that parents generally do not perceive a play-based curriculum to be an effective curriculum program. In fact, they argued, play can be incorporated into preschools as recreation or as an ice breaker during the day’s activities; yet they doubted whether their child would learn anything while playing. This study contradicted the earlier mentioned study by Qadiri and Manhas (2009), who provided the opposite results in which the majority of parents believed that a play approach is the best early learning method. Saracho (2002) revealed that parents are increasingly anxious about standards. In a survey, parents were shown often to ask how soon their child would be able to read and inquired about the achievement rates of students in terms of reading and mastery of academic skills. Parents also believed that knowing letters, alphabet, counting, and using pencils are essential skills needed for kindergarten (West 1993). This may indicate that parents often lean toward academics-based curricula or traditional schools because of all the emphasis placed on improving academic skills and performance.

By contrast, according to Levin (2000), parents who had already enrolled their children in a play-based preschool program were receptive and positive about play-based
curricula. They reported their awareness that play is an important part of a child’s life, especially if children can learn during play.

Despite the research base for developmental programs and play in education, educators have faced opposition from parents and society with regard to play in their classrooms. Adults who have not been educated in child development theories may struggle to grasp how play in the classroom actually fosters learning and growth. Elkind (2005) stated that parents do not have the ability to remember what it was like for them to learn about the world around them when they were young children, referring to this phenomenon as childhood amnesia, which helps explain why parents have difficulty understanding the benefits of play as a learning process. Consequently, some parents may avoid or question programs that entail play-driven curricula.

Parents who were asked whether they considered the curriculum of the preschool when enrolling their child reported that they had not; instead they relied on the recommendations of friends and the popularity of the school among those in their circle of friends (Moore & Derman-Sparks, 2003). Moreover, the research suggests parents generally do not see a play-based curriculum as effective. According to Morrow and Rand (1991) parents argued that play can be incorporated in preschools as recreation or as an ice breaker during the day’s activities, but they doubted whether their child would learn anything while playing.

According to Hirsch-Pasek & Golinkoff (2008), when parents have a solid understanding of play and its potential, their children actually attain higher levels of play. This information clarifies the importance of a parent’s attitude toward play. Early
childhood educators who feel play should be young children’s primary vehicle for learning can help parents and others understand play through the communication of their curriculum goals and through parent education (Blasi, Hurwitz, & Hurwitz, 2002).

**Summary**

Generally, parents know very little about preschool curriculums. They enroll their child in a particular program with the expectation that she or he will be taught the basic skills needed for kindergarten (Lubeck, 1998). When parents’ expectations are not met or when they perceive the program negatively, they question the curriculum, asserting they were initially unaware of the curriculum. Parents who disagree with or feel strongly about the curriculum may eventually remove their child from the school and proceed to find a preschool that meets their expectations.

The literature review above explained the theories behind current practice in early childhood education as well as the force behind the current application of play-based learning in preschool education. Science and empirical studies have supported the belief that play is an integral component for child development in the early years, making play-based learning the most common curriculum used in preschools in the United States today; however, the emphasis on standards, formalized testing, and accountability goals in education have motivated a reinvestigation of play-based learning to ensure that children in their preschool years indeed benefit academically. Educators continue to debate what constitutes developmentally appropriate teaching practice. The concern has trickled down to parents, whose belief systems regarding learning and education constitute an influential component in the child’s development outcomes. The topic of
parental beliefs concerning play and play-based learning has not been not well researched. Existing literature on the subject has shown that culture and social variables influence parents’ beliefs and attitudes about play and that parents hold differing views on whether or not play-based learning is effective in helping their children attain the developmental goals and objectives they have set for them.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

A layout of the research questions, research method, design, and data collection procedures used to complete this study appear in this chapter. My purpose was to demonstrate that the current study was conducted with effective and ethical methods. The information provided will assist future researchers in replicating the methodology and in adding to the body of knowledge involving parents’ beliefs and attitudes about play in preschool.

Research Questions

The main research question for this study was as follows: What are parents’ beliefs and attitudes about an early childhood play-based curriculum?

Supporting research questions included the following:

1. How have parents’ personal experiences in school contributed to their beliefs about how children learn?

2. What are parents’ goals for their children’s futures?

3. In what ways do parents think about the implications of early learning?

4. What outside factors influenced the way parents understand how children learn?

5. What do parents know about the curriculum currently practiced at Commercial Preschool.
Research Setting and Participants

This study took place at a private, for-profit, NAEYC-accredited preschool that adhered to the principles and requirements of a quality play-based preschool. I chose Commercial Preschool as the primary location for the participant selection for the following reasons: (a) personnel at Commercial Preschool have used a play-based curriculum for the past nine years, and (b) the school had strong parental involvement. Commercial Preschool was located in a Midwestern suburban community, where 48% of the 4,481 family households comprised high-income college graduates with an average household income of $154,704.

The curriculum theory espoused by the staff at the Commercial Preschool, according to its literature and website, was based on the works of Jean Piaget, who believed that the developing child builds cognitive structures for understanding and responds to experiences in his or her environment. Like Piaget, Commercial Preschool staff members believed that play behavior is a vehicle for cognitive stimulation. Child development takes place in a specific sequence, regardless of a child’s race, intelligence, or culture. The assumption is that its basic order can be enhanced or delayed, but it cannot be changed. Children learn to be comfortable in the world around them.

The respondents of this study were parents of children enrolled at Commercial Preschool. I made initial contact with the owner of Commercial Preschool to obtain permission to conduct my research at this site and subsequently received it. Through an invitation letter that appeared in the school’s electronic newsletter, parents of the 20 children in the preschool classroom were invited to participate in the research.
interested parents were asked to complete a short demographic survey (see Appendix A), which included the following: (a) parent’s age, (b) a brief ethnic description, (c) highest level of education attained, (d) length of time the child had been enrolled at the preschool, and (e) total number of the participant’s children and the number enrolled at the preschool.

To protect their identity, the interested parents completed the demographic survey and returned it to me via email at kturk@kent.edu. I planned to use purposeful sampling (H. J. Rubin & Rubin, 2005) to choose participants who represented the larger population of parents at Commercial Preschool; however, because of the number of surveys returned, purposeful sampling was unnecessary. I originally planned to interview five parents for this research project. Twenty-two surveys were sent out, and eight were returned. Of the eight applicants, one potential participant’s survey was excluded for unethical comments made prior to the interview process during an initial phone discussion to set up an interview time. Another participant returned the survey after the other participants were well immersed in the second round of interviews. The exact process used for the other participants in the earlier interviews would have been difficult to replicate for this late participant. From the pool of eight applicants, I chose six participants as opposed to five as originally proposed. The background, culture, age, and gender of participants were representative of the school population.

Minimal participant were involved. I conducted one-on-one interviews with the participants, using predetermined interview questions based on the research questions. The questions were open-ended, and the participants were asked to share their responses
and to provide clarifications to correct any misperceptions. For those parents having difficulty sharing their thoughts and experiences, I asked follow-up questions and provided participants the opportunity to elaborate. The interviews were not timed, and the participants were encouraged to share freely with minimal interruption from the interviewer.

The interviews were recorded by audio tape with the parents’ permission. Parents were informed of the option to decline the taping of the interview, in which case notes would be taken. All participants agreed to audio taping. Informed of their right to remove themselves from the study at any time without penalty, each participant was assigned a pseudonym to be used to ensure confidentiality when referring to a given participant as well as on the research site. This practice carried over during transcriptions and throughout the writing process. Only the participant and the researcher were aware of the identity corresponding to a pseudonym. This study met the required protocol as dictated by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), a committee formally designed to approve, monitor, and review research involving humans to protect the rights and welfare of the participants (see Appendix B).

I interviewed six parents and conducted three interviews with each: a life history interview, a current context interview that included a summary of their present situation, and a follow-up interview. During interviews participants sometimes react unusually to the presence of a researcher, who may unduly influence the data generated. To minimize this type of influence, Patton (1990) suggested that researchers allow an appropriate period of time for themselves and participants to “get used to each other” (p. 473). This
at times proved to be easier for some than others. A few participants, eager to talk right away, provided lengthy responses; others required more casual initial conversation and coaxing. On many occasions participants shook their heads or shrugged their shoulders as opposed to articulating an answer. In those instances, I attempted to restate the question, probing for a verbal answer with “Are you saying . . . ?” or “Is it correct to say . . . ?” Parents were interviewed according to the proposed platform to ensure a variety of perceptions for this case study. Race was not a part of this research because all six participants were Caucasian; however, gender and socioeconomic factors were evident. The participants included one male and five females. The questions were intended to measure the depth of the parents’ individual responses when questioned on their views of the subject. The interviews were focused and untimed, providing the opportunity for parents to explain their perspectives in depth.

This study was bound by these six participants whose children attended Commercial Preschool. Case study research and narrative interviews in this study did not require a large sample size because the goal was to obtain in-depth understanding of the parents’ perceptions. I planned to conduct all the interviews at Commercial Preschool in the privacy of its conference room. This small room was designed for parent–teacher conferences or teacher planning: It had a warm, comfortable, inviting environment with a small round table, four chairs, plants, coffeemaker, framed art, a bookshelf filled with materials for both professional purposes and pleasure reading. Only some interviews actually took place there. Even though it was a private location, free from teacher interruptions and a view of the children, it did not always work well for the participants
and their schedules. Varying agendas necessitated my availability for interviews at a variety of requested locations, most frequently local coffee shops and cafes.

**Theoretical Support**

As noted in the literature review and summarized here, play combines many of the activities that theorists believe foster development. Play is essential for a developing child and provides constant experiences for learning and growing (Berk & Winsler, 1995; Rogers & Sawyers, 1988; Singer et al., 2006). Piaget (1936) emphasized how children in the preoperational stage of development learn best through hands-on manipulation; play allows children to manipulate objects and the environment directly around them (Chaille & Silvern, 1996; Elkind, 1987; Singer et al., 2006; Rogers & Sawyers, 1988; Williams & Kamii, 1986). Elkind (1987) stated, “Young children are natural learners; their curiosity and desire to make sense of their world lead to spontaneous, self-directed learning” (p. 14).

Elkind (1987) explained that interest in learning diminishes when the associated activity is not directed by the child. He further stated that adult-directed learning may cause children to “become dependent on adults to direct all of their activity, afraid to take initiative” (p. 14). In contrast with adult-directed learning, play is driven by a child’s intrinsic motivation to learn and fosters creativity and problem solving (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Rogers & Sawyers, 1988). In addition, by offering choices or self-directed play activities in the classroom, educators allow children to set their own individual learning rate, decreasing the risk of pressuring them beyond their ability. Educators also encourage a love of learning in children by providing many interesting activities that will
allow them to explore and experiment in their natural environment (Bredekamp & Copple, 2009).

**Research Design and Method**

According to Bryman (2004), qualitative research provides a research strategy that usually emphasizes the words with which individuals interpret actions and the social world and may be an appropriate method for conducting social research. For this study, in which I explored deeply to help illuminate the beliefs and attitudes of parents and the foundation of those beliefs, the qualitative method was the most appropriate.

Qualitative methods have gained support and wider application in various fields in the social sciences, indicating the usefulness of the kind of data and knowledge that this method offers (Polit & Beck, 2004). Qualitative methods rely on the participant’s experience of the variable under study: an event, a psychological process, or a social phenomenon. The qualitative researcher investigates the issue or phenomenon with the assumption that the best source of information is the participant and the best kinds of data are those having been expressed and clarified by the participant (Patton, 2002). Creswell (2007) stated that the goal of qualitative research is to achieve understanding, which he described as a deep knowledge of some social setting or phenomenon.

Data gathered with the qualitative method are rich, robust, and real in the sense that they come from the personal viewpoint, understanding, and experience of the participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). By contrast quantitative methods are limited because the data are gathered and analyzed using a predetermined scale and a set of hypotheses, which may or may not be true to the context of the study (Polit & Beck,
2004). Quantitative methods also rely on statistical analysis of the data, which removes the human factor from the study; for example, values and standards for determining significance cannot aptly describe an experience such as job satisfaction (B. Johnson & Christensen, 2004).

Based on the goals of this study, qualitative methodology and the case study design were appropriate. Case study research involves the study of an issue explored through one or more cases in a bound system (i.e., a setting, a context), which is investigated over time through detailed, comprehensive data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audio taped material, and artifacts). In the current research, parents whose children attended Commercial Preschool were identified for this study. This case study was bound by these six participants whose children attend Commercial Preschool.

Acknowledging multiple realities in qualitative case studies, as is commonly done, involves discerning the various perspectives of the researcher, the case or participant, and others, which may or may not converge (Yin, 2003). As an interpretive, inductive form of research, scholars using case study explore the details and meaning of experience and do not usually attempt to test a priori hypotheses. Instead, the researcher attempts to identify important patterns and themes in the data. The richness of case studies is related to the amount of detail and contextualization that is possible when only one or a small number of focal cases and issues are analyzed (Baxter & Jack, 2008). This differs from phenomenology, a research method designed for obtaining a description of an experience as it is lived in order to understand the meaning of that experience for those
who have it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In the case study method the researcher investigates a contemporary phenomenon over time to provide an in-depth description of essential dimensions and processes of the phenomenon (Yin, 2003).

In this research I adopted the case study design because I believe that individual cases provide substantial in-depth information. Case studies focus on the individual, his or her experiences, and immediate reality to derive meaning and understand the issue or concept under examination; moreover, the case study provides real examples from real people who are unencumbered by the use of predetermined measures or surveys and whose responses will result only in numbers and statistics (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In this study, individuals were interviewed and asked to share their stories based on open-ended questions that correspond to the over-arching research questions. In doing so, the individuals’ experiences and beliefs were discussed in order to arrive at an understanding of the research topic: parents’ beliefs, understanding, and attitudes about a play-based curriculum.

The case study design has been criticized as narrow. Focusing only on a small number of cases, generalizations are difficult to draw and apply because the results are often true only for the cases in the study; however, in this research the objective was to understand parents’ conceptions of a play-based curriculum. I did not intend to establish any theory or disprove any hypothesis but instead to explore and gain a new understanding of a given phenomenon. Case study, defined as an empirical inquiry about a contemporary phenomenon in a real-life context, especially when the relationship between the two is ambiguous (Yin, 2003), played a pivotal role in this research,
highlighting the detailed analysis of the events, human condition, or social relationships. The use of the case study for this research aligned with Creswell’s (2002) view that the case study serves as the gateway of an inquiry that provides profound understanding of the system where a problem or issue is situated. The system will eventually become the case because the researcher chooses an event, activity, or any form of contemporary phenomenon in the system that does not have clear boundaries in the real-life context, making it the subject of the case. Some researchers have offered words of caution regarding the difficulty associated with the case study method (Stake, 2005), but the sense of significance generated by the case study used in this research project rose above all dilemmas and formed the core of this investigation.

Narrative in-depth interviews were used as the method of qualitative data collection in this study. All interviews were conducted using H. J. Rubin and Rubin’s (2005) responsive interview model, which emphasized the relationship between interviewer and interviewee and focused on depth of understanding; it was a flexible design. Social constructivists have recognized the qualities of the responsive interview model as important to research, appreciating the influence of the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee yet at the same time recognizing each interviewee as an individual. This approach can elicit far richer information than a survey; furthermore, interviews offer the researcher a means to clarify responses and to validate participant responses. Cohen et al. (2000) posited that individual behaviors can be understood only via thorough familiarity with individuals’ interpretations of the world around them; therefore, meaningful social action needs to be interpreted from the point of view of the
actors or the people in particular situations. One might say that parents who have already enrolled their child in a play-based preschool would naturally feel more strongly about a play-based curriculum than parents who have not sent their child to a preschool with such a curriculum in place (Bryman, 2004).

This qualitative case study was conducted to help answer the following question: What are parents’ beliefs and attitudes about a play curriculum?

Using a qualitative case study, I examined six preschool parents’ beliefs and attitudes through a narrative-inquiry data-collection strategy, which showcased the experiences of parents with play-based curricula in early childhood programs. Case study and narrative inquiry were used to understand the particular details in a historically and socially bound context (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) thinking derived from Dewey’s concept of experience. For Dewey experience involves change that is connected to consequence, either positive or negative. Without consequence, experience would be meaningless. Experience is based on interaction between the self and another context or environment, such as another person, object, or idea. Without interaction, no experience occurs (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Learning results from an experience that arises from the interaction of two principles: continuity and interaction. Continuity is the experience that will influence a person’s future for better or for worse; interaction is the situational influence on an individual’s experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Various boundaries must be considered when implementing narrative inquiry. “Dewey’s two criteria of experience—continuity and interaction—provide a theoretical
frame for identifying tension at the boundaries. Tensions pertaining to continuity, brought up by the experience, describe temporality, people, action, and certainty” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 21). Temporality involves the manner in which participants look at a specific event in time, which has past, present, and future implications. The second tension to consider is the participant’s progression of change. Next, the participant’s actions must be analyzed, using narrative interpretation before any meaning can be present; however, the concept of certainty concerning the interpretation of the participants’ actions should be tentatively questioned. Further analysis is needed, and no absolute truth is guaranteed. Another key factor to consider is the context in relation to events, location, and interaction with other people. All of these boundaries interconnect; the researcher using narrative inquiry looks to each for answers to explain the participant’s story (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) three-dimensional space questions allowed me to work toward defining the final research question: What are parents’ beliefs and attitudes about a play curriculum?

Choosing case study with narrative inquiry allowed me to experience a small bound setting while looking forward, backward, inward, and outward to understand parents’ beliefs and attitudes about the benefits of play. This methodology allows for social and political phenomena to appear. When people are willing to share their unique stories, feelings, and experiences, the case study approach provides first-hand data. I planned to report personal experiences chronologically or thematically in a particular setting to offer an analysis or to make sense of what the participants expressed (Yin,
1994). My process involved restorying an individual’s account in a logical, meaningful, and organized way. Following the interviews, which took place during January and February 2012, the interview content was transcribed. Data were analyzed throughout the data collection period, January through July 2012, to identify key elements and systematically code the transcriptions to uncover the themes and complexities of each story. Restorying the data into logical sequences lent insight into and understanding of the person’s experiences, allowing others to see, hear, and understand that person’s narrative.

The purpose of using case study was that it allowed me to witness and report a descriptive setting in order to share experiences. Drawing on Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) three-dimensional framework for this study allowed me to look at participants’ understandings through the stories of their experiences. As such, I used Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) three-dimensional model of space in which as the researcher I looked at participants’ experiences in multiple ways: forward and backward, inward and outward, and situated in place (see Table 1). Personal and social growth can be apparent when asking for a participant to consider a situation in a past, present, and future context. Having initial and post interviews provided me with the opportunity to record any changes in viewpoint, interpretations, confusion, or evaluation in a specific situation (Yin, 1994). Dewey (1938) wrote of the continuity and interaction of experiences as well as the importance of focusing more on the individual as opposed to the collective whole. He promoted the consideration of actual life experiences and asking for insightful, meaningful lessons.
Table 1

*Three Dimension Space Changes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Explanation of Intent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Backward</td>
<td>How do personal experiences in home and school contribute to parents’ current beliefs about the way children learn?</td>
<td>To understand how parents’ past experiences influenced their perceptions of the way children learn and develop. This question provided a space to explore past boundaries as suggested by Clandinin and Connelly (2000). The question provided participants an opportunity to explore their own experiences as it increased their understanding of the way children learn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forward</td>
<td>What are parents’ future goals for their children?</td>
<td>To determine how parents’ future educational goals for their children influenced their selection of the early childhood program in which their young children participate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inward</td>
<td>In what ways do parents think about the implications of early learning?</td>
<td>To gain an understanding of how parents perceived early learning. In what ways did they understand that infants and young children learn and how they learn?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outward</td>
<td>What are the outside factors that influence how parents understand how children learn?</td>
<td>To assist me in understanding how parents used outside information in their decision-making process. Did current policies, such as standards and standardized testing, affect their decision? Did readings or research play into their decision?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situated in Place</td>
<td>What do parents know about the current curriculum being practiced at Commercial PS?</td>
<td>To gain an understanding of what parents actually knew and understood about the current curriculum practices where their children were enrolled.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Collection**

In qualitative inquiry, the researcher acts as the instrument through which the data is collected, that is the “human instrument” of data collection (Patton, 1990). Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified the characteristics that make humans the “instrument of choice” for naturalistic inquiry. Humans are responsive to environmental cues and able to interact with the situation. They (a) have the ability to collect information at multiple levels simultaneously, (b) are able to perceive situations holistically, (c) are able to process data as soon as they become available, (d) can provide immediate feedback and request verification of data, and (e) can explore atypical or unexpected responses. I
followed the qualitative method, conducting one-on-one interviews with the parent participants in a relaxed, engaging atmosphere; I used a predetermined interview protocol in which questions, based on the research questions, were asked of the parents. The questions were open-ended, and the participants were asked to share their responses and clarifications to correct any misperceptions. If parents had difficulty sharing their thoughts and experiences, I asked additional questions to assist them in elaborating on their answers to the previous questions. The interviews were not timed, and the participants were able to share freely with minimal interruption from the interviewer. The interviews were recorded on audio tape, but permission from the participants was sought before initiating the interview. Interviews were used to understand an individual’s perspectives (Fontana & Frey, 1994). They allow investigation and the discussion of matters that cannot be observed (Wellington, 2000). Interviews also foster reflection on the complexity of social behavior as well as facilitate explanations of its causes (Silverman, 2001).

Following the suggestions of Merriam (1988), I used interviews as the data collection technique in order to understand the cases in their totality. I intended to create a holistic depiction of each case within the overall case and accordingly use interviews, participant observation, and direct observation to augment my research. To maximize the usefulness of the data, I followed standard protocols associated with each of these methods. For example, I was mindful that an interview should be a focused face-to-face meeting between two parties, namely the interviewer and the interviewee (Treece & Treece, 1977). The difference between an interview and a simple list of
open-ended questions is that the former may be considered an ordinary dialogue between two people.

I did not adhere to a rigid set of questions but instead used a broad-based guideline to gather information on issues relevant to my research. I asked probing questions to investigate those early-formation beliefs so to establish a link to their current beliefs for their own child. I referred to Briggs’ (1986) techniques for establishing rapport, expressing interest in the interviewees’ memories, avoiding loaded questions. I paused to allow time for reflection and elaboration. I asked follow-up questions for further clarification accordingly. I asked for examples as needed.

Through this process, dialogue can supply a wealth of information if the discussion can be extended to several topics related to the main focus of the study. I used a semistructured interview approach, in which I asked additional questions as necessary for more extensive coverage of the topic. This method enabled me to gather substantial in-depth information (Treece & Treece, 1977).

**Observations**

In addition to the interviews, observations were made during several events, including parent–teacher conferences, PTO meetings, and some parent celebrations, such as Community Games and Stepping Up for the Environment. These special events occurred throughout the data collection process. It was my intent to enhance my interviews with observations of these events by documenting which of the children’s parents attended parent–teacher conferences, PTO meetings, and parents’ information meetings and by noting which concerns they shared, any consistency in attendance at
these meetings, how parent participation among the six parents differed during celebratory activities with their children as opposed to conferences and informational evenings. During observations, I focused on interactions relevant to this study. As a safeguard, participants were granted the right to exclude the researcher from any setting without penalty. Participant observations helped me examine the manner in which participants manifested their beliefs and attitudes about the curriculum and play.

These observations assisted me in generating follow-up questions for interviews. For example, one parent meeting consisted of a guest speaker with a total of 15 parents in attendance; all but one of the participants in this study attended. The presentation, which was entitled “Learning Through Play” and explained what play is, what it means, what it looks like, what children do, and what they learn, led me to my follow-up questions: What exactly does play mean to you? Do you feel learning occurs during play time? They also viewed their children in the play curriculum center.

Throughout this study I observed eight events, which took place between January 2012 and June 2012. These events provided insight into what information parents received and from whom. They also provided a solid understanding of parent involvement. Among the events observed were the following: (a) Community Games (February 2012), (b) Stepping Up for the Environment (March 2012), (c) parent meeting (April 2012), (d) PTO meeting (May 2012), (e) Mother’s Day Tea (May 2012), (f) parent–teacher conferences (May 2012), (g) Father’s Day (June 2012), and (h) graduation (June 2012).
The two best represented events were parent–teacher conferences and parent information–curriculum night. All six participants attended parent–teacher conferences, which focused on the child’s progress; five of the six attended the parent information–curriculum night. The least represented events were Community Games, Stepping Up for the Environment, PTO, and graduation—each attended by three of the participants. When asked how participants chose which event to attend, they indicated that Community Games and Stepping Up for the Environment were held during the day; therefore, work schedules interfered. According to the school’s owner, PTO was a new program, which had not garnered substantial participation. When asked about the lack of attendance despite its evening scheduling, responses indicated that attendance was too difficult because of family or work commitments. The center’s graduation ceremony for kindergartners had lower participant attendance because not all six of the participants’ children were of graduation age. Preschool at Commercial Preschool was available to children aged 3 to 5. Three of the participants’ children graduated, and those three parents attended. Three were not scheduled to graduate in 2012; however, those three younger preschoolers would return to Commercial Preschool in the fall. Artifacts, such as the parent handbook, newsletters, newspaper articles featuring the Commercial Preschool, research articles distributed to the parents, school literature including its mission statement, student rights, and student portfolio information, were analyzed as supplementary material. Through these artifacts I gained specific knowledge of the information parents received as well as a strong impression of the way preschool
information was presented. Clear statements about the play-based curriculum appeared in the materials, including the following:

1. “Play-based preschools better help young children develop skills necessary for future learning.”
2. “When compared to academics-based programs, children in play-based programs outperform the others socially and academically.”
3. “Parents, do your homework!”
4. “Studies show 3- and 4-year-olds thrive on an environment focused on play.”

When children are exposed to a sociocultural play-based program, they receive scaffolding from adults and peers, which increases development with guidance to accomplish increasingly difficult tasks (Berk, 1994; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2008). The degree to which parents understand the curriculum followed by their children would also directly influence parental support for the learning activities at their child’s preschool, and the type of curriculum their child would be exposed to at Commercial Preschool was made patently clear in the literature.

**Timeline**

Data collection for this study occurred over a 7-month period from January 2012 through July 2012 (See Table 2). I communicated and worked closely with the school’s teachers and administrators regarding the details of the research plan and the interview protocol. I conducted three interviews (see Appendix C) with six parents: They included a life history interview in January 2012 that was approximately two hours in length; a current context interview in February 2012, approximately one hour in length and
focused on their current situation. The final or follow-up interview, which was one hour in length, occurred in July 2012. The follow-up interview was used to clarify the study and to thank the participants. My analysis and writings of the findings, discussion, and recommendation evolved along with the study from January 2012 to July 2012. Data analysis continued through December 2012 and throughout the writing of this study to interpret the findings accurately. During the process, I dedicated time to refining the documentation of the findings, discussions, and recommendations.

This study met the required protocol as dictated by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), a committee formally designed to approve, monitor, and review research involving humans to protect the rights and welfare of participants.

**Data Analysis**

The gathered data were analyzed using the qualitative method, an inductive approach that starts with a rough definition of research questions, data collection, coding, saturating categories, and exploring relationships among categories (Bryman, 2004). The subprocesses involved in this data analysis method were data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Huberman & Miles, 1998). After collection, the data was first reduced to its component parts in order to make complicated issues understandable (Bernard, 1988, cited in Huberman & Miles, 1998). I spent a significant amount of time from January 2012 to July 2012 reading each transcribed interview, reviewing my observation notes, and recording my understanding as the study unfolded to draw connections among emerging themes. A benefit to analyzing data throughout the
### Table 2

**Data Collection Timeline**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2014</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dec</td>
<td>Jan</td>
<td>Feb</td>
<td>Mar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Participant Selection</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Life History Interview</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Current Context Interview</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Follow-up Interview to Clarify, Thank, &amp; Exit</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Observations: Parent-Teacher Conf, Parent Meetings, &amp; Events</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Data Collection</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Analysis, Findings, Interpretations, &amp; Discussions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Analysis and Interpretation, Proofing, Editing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
data-collection process was that my analysis served to inform me how to continue to ask questions to elicit better information. Creswell (2007) suggested that by conducting data analysis throughout the research process, the researcher can use early forms of analysis to drive subsequent data collection. For example, after observations I reviewed my notes closely to develop further questions and points for additional discussion or to establish clarity during the follow-up interviews.

Throughout this stage, I carefully coded transcribed interviews and notes for emerging themes (Wellington, 2000). I used a categorical aggregation as suggested by Stake (1995) to organize and analyze common threads between participants and across interviews and observations. During categorical aggregation with regard to parents’ beliefs and attitudes about a play-based curriculum, particular attention was given to common as well as exceptional descriptions of significant influences identified throughout their stories and to meanings associated with their current beliefs and attitudes.

Second, data display allowed me to conceptualize the material as organized and assembled data. After identifying themes I focused my attention on the personal narratives of each participant. With this approach, I was able to improve my understanding of the significant role each theme played throughout their lived stories. I used Stake’s (1995) direct interpretation to closely examine instances that emerged as significant for individual participants.

The third process was conclusion drawing, which involved interpreting and giving meaning to data (Wellington, 2000). These processes provided a useful starting point for
data analysis in this investigation, but Wellington (2000) argued that analyzing qualitative data is messier and more complicated than these three processes would suggest. He posited that data analysis must involve immersing oneself in the data, reflecting upon it, taking it apart, synthesizing it, relating and locating the data, and presenting it. I used these strategies during the data analysis of this research.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed in detail, and a large amount of data from the interviews was printed. I read and reread each transcript carefully to understand a holistic sense of the interview before identifying the appropriate codes for the data. Identifying appropriate codes and categorizing the data into themes were important steps in the data analysis. Coding is “the translation of question responses and respondent information to specific categories for the purpose of analysis” Kerlinger (1970, p. 96). After coding, I examined and compared the data in the categories and compared the data across categories in order to build an integrated explanation (H. J. Rubin & Rubin, 1995). During this phase unexpected threads emerged, so I engaged in an additional layer of analysis. The processes of analysis for this study was as follows: transcribing interviews, reading transcription, analyzing data and finding codes, categorizing and translating data, determining themes, examining and comparing the data, building a logical chain of findings, and finally adding an additional layer of analysis.

Analysis in narrative inquiry has been described as a transition from field texts to research texts. Field texts included my transcribed interviews and typed field notes from observations and artifacts. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) wrote, “Field texts have a recording quality to them. Research texts are at a distance from field texts and grow out
of the repeated asking of questions concerning meaning and significance” (p. 132). In moving from field texts to research text, I spent a significant amount of time listening to recorded interviews while reading corresponding written transcripts to correct any errors. I then used interim texts as a means to record my understanding as it unfolded and to draw connections between emerging themes as I developed major assertions. Clandinin and Connelly suggested that interim texts can be used between field texts and research texts.

Throughout the data collection process I used my analysis to inform how I continued to ask questions in subsequent interviews. I reviewed transcripts as well as relistened to audio via Smart Pen. Creswell (2007) suggested that by conducting data analysis throughout the research process, the researcher can use early forms of analysis to drive subsequent data collection. For instance, after observations I closely reviewed field notes to develop further questions and points for further discussion to establish clarity during follow-up interviews.

During data analysis I carefully coded transcribed interviews and field notes for emerging themes. I used a categorical aggregation as suggested by Stake (1995) to organize and analyze common threads among participants and across interviews, artifacts, and observations. During the analysis of interviews, I paid particular attention to points of time or experiences that seemed significant to each participant. I then went back through each transcript and color coded the themes that were significant for each participant. Next, I copied quotations from participants’ interviews and posted them onto corresponding charts. Each chart consisted of one of three established themes:
socialization, structure, and reputation. These themes emerged over the course of the three interviews and were referenced during observation. Analyzing participants’ narratives, I used Stake’s (1995) direct interpretation to closely examine instances that seemed particularly significant for individual participants.

The discussion of the research findings was based on the individual narratives of the respondents, the objective of which was to provide as many divergent and convergent ideas on a specified issue or context as possible.

**Trustworthiness and Validity**

Despite growing agreement that “value-free interpretive research is impossible” (Denzin, 1989, p. 23), the criticism that qualitative researchers may have unknowingly imposed their values, beliefs, or biases onto the participants and may have thus unduly influenced the data is perhaps the most common criticism of any qualitative inquiry (Patton, 1990). The apparent surplus of researcher influence expected in qualitative inquiries may be the result of the inherent frankness and candor with which qualitative research exposes the inevitability of such influence (Patton, 1990). Because the researcher seeks to observe and interpret meanings in context, finalizing research strategies before data collection has begun is neither possible nor appropriate (Patton, 1990).

According to Maxwell (2005) validity can be defined as the correct or credible description of the conclusion, explanation, or interpretation. He also stated that validity includes not only triangulation and member checking but also deciphering specific alternative interpretations and explanations. These areas include researcher bias and
reactivity. Furthermore, validity tests can be performed by the researcher to include intensive, long-term involvement, rich data, respondent validation, intervention, discrepant evidence and negative cases, triangulation, quasistatistics, and comparison (Maxwell, 2005). I kept those issues and areas of concern in mind throughout this research.

Credibility in the naturalist sense must show that the researcher strives to represent multiple constructions adequately; this includes the reconstructions and how they are pursued and presented (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To achieve credibility, the researcher must first carry out the inquiry in such a way that the probability that the findings will be found to be credible is enhanced, and second, to demonstrate the credibility of the findings by having them approved by the constructors of the multiple realities being studied. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 296)

To ensure trustworthiness, I used peer examination–debriefing and member checking as suggested by Creswell (2007), Lincoln and Guba (1985), and Merriam (1998).

In using peer examination–debriefing (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998), I shared data and emerging assertions with members of my committee for review. Using peer debriefing in this way not only assisted me in keeping my perspective in check by offering the perspective of outside reviewers while also providing support in the construction of emerging methodological design but also assisted me in ensuring that methods were dependable and confirming the trustworthiness of findings.
Debriefing sessions happened periodically throughout the data collection and analysis stages, and pseudonyms for every person were used at all times.

I also used member checking to ensure the credibility of this research (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1988). In using member checking I shared transcribed interviews with each corresponding participant for accuracy and commentary, allowing participants to correct any factual errors, clarify intentions, and provide feedback on emerging assertions. Member checking occurred at the end of each proceeding interview.

In addressing issues of the transferability of this research, I drew on Lincoln and Guba (1985), who stated that the naturalist cannot specify the external validity of an inquiry; he or she can provide only the thick description necessary to enable someone interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion about whether transfer can be contemplated as a possibility. (p. 316)

Although my intent was to share the stories of how a particular group of parents came to understand and make the decisions for their child to attend a preschool that adheres to an early childhood play-based curriculum, these findings may lend some insight into similar contexts. In making this research transparent, I used thick descriptions not only of the participants and their historical and contextual influences but also of who I am as a researcher and my methods for collecting data and process of emerging assertions. Such thick description allows the reader to make individual judgments about transferability.
Limitations of Case Study and Narrative Inquiry

Case study and narrative inquiry nevertheless have disadvantages. Case studies are criticized as “soft” research, disallowing generalizability (Yin, 1994); however, that point may be challenged. For instance, case studies examine individuals who possess varied unique characteristics. People and environments differ; thus, generalizability is not sought. Instead, the benefit of using narrative inquiry lies in showcasing individuals’ experiences. An additional criticism of case study methodologies is that the researcher can become close to the participants, and doing so can be detrimental to the research if not handled properly (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Some have also argued that this closeness is a methodological strength because the same closeness allows the researcher to acquire substantial amounts of in-depth information; furthermore, the participant may find sharing personal experiences easier if she or he feels close to the researcher. A researcher must be able to remain objective, even when the two parties become familiar with one another. An additional risk to the participant may arise when the stories, interviews, and writings must be analyzed by the researcher (Yin, 1994): Unintentional memory and perception can vary from time to time, setting to setting, and person to person. The researcher must remain alert for exaggerations and understatements and take them into consideration (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

I kept these considerations in mind before beginning this case study. I continued to feel very strongly that a case study methodology was the best approach for acquiring personal insight into how the parents of young children understand play-based early childhood curricula. Both oral and written data were collected and analyzed from a
narrative-inquiry model. Asking any individual to recall a situation may provide information short of the absolute truth because perception and memory can be faulty (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000); therefore, generalization most likely does not occur and is unimportant. I considered this limitation of the data when interpreting the findings.

I chose the qualitative research method, which is oriented toward identifying and describing human experiences of various subjects with the help of interviews, because it best suits the types of questions asked and the information sought. Throughout this process, I kept in mind the possibility of influence by the participants’ environment; I was also aware that interpretation of the data could be subject to my own biases and personal views (Myers, 2002). To avoid communicative blunders as described by Briggs (1986), researchers must adapt to the participants’ environment to elicit the best information from them; therefore, I incorporated Briggs’ interview techniques as the model for social interaction. Accordingly, I conducted interviews in natural settings or a requested location for convenience, including the Commercial Preschool premises. I analyzed recurring phrases, patterns, or statements from the participants in order to develop a theoretical basis to reach my conclusion.

The limitations of the study included the difficulty involved in deriving generalizations from the research findings. With this particular case study design, findings are true only for the given research setting and participants. Another consideration was that demographic factors, such as race, religion, and socioeconomic status, might have affected the responses of the participants; moreover, all responses were
taken at face value, as true and reflective of the experiences and thoughts of the participants.

**Summary**

In this chapter I presented the theoretical framework of the study; the research method and design were also presented and discussed in detail to justify their use. In addition, the chapter included a description of the research setting, the research sample, the data-gathering procedure, data analysis, the timeline, and concerns about validity and reliability as well as the limitations of the study designed to answer the main research question for this study: What are parents’ beliefs and attitudes about an early childhood play-based curriculum?

Chapter 4 connects the common themes that prevailed throughout the participants stories. Chapter 5 contains the data pointing towards academic and play, indicating what counts and does not count as learning, and finally Chapter 6 includes findings in the context of the literature review in Chapter 2, establishing future research possibilities and outlining implications for parents and teachers.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS: THE PURPOSE OF PRESCHOOL

The content of this chapter was generated from data to illuminate findings that were both intricate and substantial. To facilitate the presentation of the analysis, the research findings have been presented in two separate chapters: Chapters 4 and 5. In addition, three overarching research themes were identified and serve as an umbrella covering both chapters and as the foundation for the discussion in the final chapter. Gleaned from data on what drove the participants to choose Commercial Preschool, the umbrella themes that emerged are socialization, reputation, and structure. Although all three are intertwined throughout the findings, socialization and reputation are salient in Chapter 4; structure, in Chapter 5. After briefly reviewing the umbrella themes in Chapter 4, I have introduced the study participants and provided data analysis and findings pointing to preparation as the purpose of preschool. Parents expected their children to be prepared for academic, social, and behavioral success in school yet harbored some fears about the need for preparing them for the future. As frequently happens in qualitative research, two additional important findings emerged as I analyzed the data collectively. I found that participants had chosen the preschool for two reasons: (a) to fill a need for care and (b) to fill a perceived void in their own capabilities. Finally, in this chapter I have discussed cultural trends associated with the parents’ beliefs and have closed with a final summary. Entitled The Nature of Knowledge, Chapter 5 contains collected data on what counts and does not count as learning and what counts as a measure of knowledge. Simply put, participants equated learning with academics, not play; and what counts as a measure
of knowledge is grades and testing. The body of Chapter 5 includes analysis, findings, and discussion surrounding the gap between (a) what parents perceived as the nature of knowledge and learning and (b) the play-based curriculum used at the school. Chapter 6, the concluding chapter, contains (a) the study findings in the context of the literature presented in Chapter 2, (b) topics for potential future research, (c) implications, (d) the innovative nature of this study in terms of parents’ attitudes and beliefs about a play curriculum, and (e) areas in which the research findings can be implemented.

**Research Themes**

Three major overarching themes were identified during the analysis of data derived from interviews and observations of the six participants (see Appendix D). I determined that socialization, structure, and reputation were the driving forces behind their decisions to place their children at Commercial Preschool.

The findings indicate that at the outset parents had divergent reasons for placing their children in preschool. Although four parents stated that their choice was based on a need for structure or academic readiness for school, the data analysis shows a serious gap between their understanding of the curriculum at the preschool where they chose to enroll their children and how it might be enacted on one hand and their own goals for their children’s early education on the other.

**Socialization**

Vygotsky (1978) described learning as social, that is, occurring during social events and as a child interacts with others. The six parents in this study indicated a similar belief, stating that socialization, or interacting with others, was a primary factor in
their decision for their children to attend preschool. Through their stories I determined that these parents viewed good social skills as necessary to function successfully in society.

Before preschools existed, children played in neighborhoods with one another and flourished socially. Over time preschools replaced the neighborhood in providing opportunities for socialization as well as the many other emotional and intellectual benefits provided by a child-centered program. Findings indicate that five of the six parents viewed socialization as a desired outcome to be gained from a good preschool experience; in fact, these parents chose a preschool specifically for socialization, but each had her or his own reason. A loving home provides a child with opportunity for growth, but because of any number of circumstances, a child may have little opportunity to play, learn, share, or otherwise interact at home with children their own age. The preschool socialization experience provides opportunities to interact with peers every day in a variety of ways (e.g., meals, outdoor play, story time, art).

**Reputation**

Four of the parents asserted that their initial contact with Commercial Preschool was motivated by its reputation instead of their own research, observation, location, or cost. They viewed a “good reputation” as quality, which meant good outcomes, which in turn guaranteed a good life.

Three of the participants indicated that Commercial Preschool was too expensive for their family budget, but they were willing to sacrifice in other areas to provide this foundation for their children to ensure a successful start in school. For two of them, the
reputation of Commercial Preschool was demonstrated simply by the number of neighborhood children who attended it. One participant actually talked to the members of other families, asking purposeful questions about the school’s reputation to determine whether or not it was the right place for her son. One participant approved of the philosophy of the national Commercial Preschool organization but not necessarily the administration of the particular franchise in which her child had been enrolled, so she transferred the child from one Commercial Preschool to another Commercial Preschool based on its reputation.

**Structure**

Structure can help children feel safe. Preschool educators know that structure entails routine, consistency, and predictability. To the participants, however, structure meant academics associated with skill and drill and sitting quietly. They had sent their children to preschool because they believed that attending would give them a head start on academic skills. Parents felt preschool was a rite of passage, and an academic preschool would prepare children for the challenges of education. Naturally, a parent might feel anxious in today’s climate, but these participants seemed to be caught up in the achievement panic. Thus, for them structure equaled academics, which equaled good grades, which in turn equaled admission to a good college, which equaled a good career, which equaled a good life.

In summary, three overarching themes—socialization, reputation and structure—have been derived from findings. In the next section the participants are introduced, and information about their beliefs and practices are organized around the research questions.
Introduction to the Study Participants

The current chapter contains findings derived from interviews held with the six respondents, who were parents of children attending the Commercial Preschool. To improve outcomes, the interviews I conducted were semistructured in two ways: (a) I asked planned questions that were designed to help me answer the set research questions, and (b) I adapted the questions to take into consideration the unique situation of each participating parent.

The first participant was Mike, a Caucasian single dad raising his only child Mikey alone. Mike was a college graduate content with his career and enjoying his job. Mike was raised by both his mother and father. A middle child, Mike lived in a suburban neighborhood along with his brother and sister. Mike’s mom was a stay-at-home mom, having no desire to work outside the home. According to Mike’s description, his mother was devoted to their upbringing. Despite having a stay-at-home mom, Mike attended preschool for half a day several days a week. Family was important to Mike, who expressed the importance of siblings. He hoped to have additional children but had no plans in the foreseeable future. Although Mike raised his son alone, he tried to consult and include his son’s mother in important decisions, such as choosing a preschool, kindergarten, and school for their 3-year-old son. Mike realized that the absence of his son’s mother in his life was crucial and hoped that she could regain parental rights in the future, but for now it was best for Mikey to have a calm, consistent, warm, and loving environment, both at home and in school.
The second participant was Jennifer. She and her husband, both Caucasian, had one daughter Gabby. Both Jennifer, 30, and her husband, 31, had earned college degrees; Jennifer’s husband held a master’s degree in education. Jennifer worked in a downtown metropolitan area. Although they lived in a residential suburban area at the time of this study, she valued culture and hoped one day to move to a neighborhood offering more cultural diversity for their young daughter. Gabby, a premature baby, was kept after her birth in the hospital for an extended period, during which, she was monitored closely because of her small size and underdeveloped immune system. Perhaps influenced by her own childhood experiences as an only child, Jennifer believed that Gabby would be their only child. When Jennifer’s parents were divorced, her mom gained custody of Jennifer. When her mother passed away while Jennifer was still quite young, she went to live with her father. She remembered being raised primarily by her grandparents, both of whom were deaf. Constantly surrounded by older cousins, Jennifer didn’t feel her language skills were impaired. In fact, she learned sign language at an early age in order to communicate with her grandparents and it proved to be such a helpful communication tool that she used it with her young daughter.

Patty, the third participant, was a 41-year-old Caucasian woman with three children. At the time of this writing, Patty, who did not attend college, was married to a man with a college degree. He was the father of her two younger children. Her oldest child, a 13-year-old girl was from a previous marriage. Her younger children attended Commercial Preschool. Patty lived in the community where Commercial Preschool was located. She was very involved and active with her children as well as community
events. Patty felt that a strong community was very important when raising young children. She moved many times following her divorce and was overjoyed to hear of the strong community relations where Commercial Preschool was located. Patty had two older siblings and one younger in her family.

The fourth participant, Connie, a 32-year-old Caucasian woman had four children: One had previously attended Commercial Preschool, and one was enrolled at the time of this writing; her other two children were in high school. Neither Connie nor her husband attended college. When her parents divorced, her father cared for her. She attended preschool but considered time spent at home with her father to have been more beneficial to her future.

The fifth participant, Laura, a 48-year-old Caucasian woman, was a former early childhood teacher who held a bachelor’s degree in education. Laura’s husband was a physician, and they had three sons, two in high school and one at Commercial Preschool. Both Laura and her husband had grown up in neighborhoods near Commercial Preschool. Laura was the youngest child in her family of four children. Although Laura’s mom had been a stay-at-home mom, she volunteered in her children’s schools.

The sixth participant in the study was Donna, a 47-year-old Caucasian woman. Donna attended college and earned a bachelor’s degree. She stated that she wished she had taken her education more seriously and had performed better. Donna enjoyed the social aspects of college, but she felt she would have had more professional opportunities had she been a more serious student. She was the mother of two stepdaughters from her husband’s first marriage. Her only biological child, their first, Aiden, was enrolled in
Commercial Preschool. Donna, who came from a family of six, felt she had limited alone
time with her parents; nevertheless, she still had pleasant memories of her childhood.

Table 3 provides a brief description of each participant: age, marital status and
number of children, position on play vs. academics, college, family background, earliest
memory of school, influence (i.e., what influenced their decision: socialization,
reputation), start age (i.e., age of their child when he or she entered Commercial
Preschool), years child attended Commercial Preschool. The table summarizes my
analysis of their initial responses regarding enrollment at Commercial Preschool. My
intent in this table was to make a substantial amount of information accessible.

Observations Review

In addition to the interviews, observations (see Appendix E), which took place at
parent–teacher conferences, PTO meetings, and various parent celebrations, occurred
periodically throughout the data collection. Noting parents’ behavior during these
activities enhanced my data collection by providing additional insight into participants’
knowledge, concerns, and satisfaction with Commercial Preschool. Attendance was good
because they were all very involved in their young children’s early education.

Patty attended the largest number of these events, present at seven of eight of
them. She stated in her interviews that her parents expected good grades but were not
involved in the process: “We went to school because that’s what you did; you went to
school. It was like our job.” Patty reverted to her past experiences in determining what
she wanted for her daughter. Unlike her parents, she was very involved in her child’s
Table 3

*Participants’ Background*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital Status and Number of Children</th>
<th>Play Academics</th>
<th>College: Participant and Spouse</th>
<th>Parental Figure in Participant’s Early Life</th>
<th>Earliest Memory</th>
<th>Influence</th>
<th>Child Start Age</th>
<th>Yrs. at Preschool</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Single dad Only child: son</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>B.S.</td>
<td>Stay-at-home mom</td>
<td>PS Environment Classroom</td>
<td>Reputation, structure, socialization for school</td>
<td>3 yrs.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Married, former ECE teacher; Spouse: physician; 2 HS sons, 1 at PS</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>M.A.Ed. Spouse: M.D.</td>
<td>Stay-at-home mom</td>
<td>K Teacher</td>
<td>Caring teachers, warm environment, reputation, socialization</td>
<td>3 yrs.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Married, 1 child: daughter; Spouse: educator</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>B.S. Spouse: M.A.Ed.</td>
<td>Raised by deaf grandparents after mom died</td>
<td>K Sticker progress chart</td>
<td>Reputation, structure, Socialization, visits</td>
<td>2 yrs.</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donna</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Married, 2 step-daughters (spouse’s); 1 son together at Commercial PS</td>
<td>X mix</td>
<td>B.A. Spouse: U.S.Army</td>
<td>Mom: Nurse RN</td>
<td>K Teacher Classroom</td>
<td>Caring teachers, reputation, environment, socialization</td>
<td>1 yr.</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connie</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Married, 4 children: 3 boys, 1 girl. 1 former Commercial PS grad + 1 current Commercial PS</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>No college Spouse: No college</td>
<td>Raised by dad (divorce)</td>
<td>PS Did not enjoy</td>
<td>Past experience</td>
<td>3 yrs.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patty</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Married, 3 children: 1 daughter from previous marriage. Son and daughter w/current spouse at Commercial PS</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>No college Spouse: M.S.</td>
<td>Stay-at-home mom</td>
<td>Grade 1 Teacher</td>
<td>Reputation, individual attention for learning</td>
<td>2 yrs.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
education. She also reverted to the expectations her parents placed on her for grades and academic success. She, too, had high expectations for Georgia and was very involved in the process, meeting with teachers and helping at home.

Both Donna and Laura attended six of the eight events. The two events that Donna did not attend were (a) “Step Up for the Environment,” an Earth Day celebration that occurred during the day, and (b) the graduation ceremonies because her son was too young to participate. Donna admitted her lack of knowledge concerning the curriculum at Commercial Preschool. When she attended an evening meeting on the importance of play in the early childhood curriculum, she finally gained an appreciation of the matter. Laura did not attend Community Games and Father’s Day: Her lack of attendance at the Community Games was simply an oversight, and Father’s Day was not for her.

Jennifer and Mike attended five of the eight events. Their lack of attendance at some events was the result of timing, not lack of commitment. Neither Mike nor Jennifer attended graduation because their children were too young to graduate. Neither attended the PTO meeting, which was held during the evening. Both of these parents stated that they limited their evening activities because they enjoyed spending evenings with their families. Mike did not attend Mother’s Day, and Jennifer did not attend the daytime “Step up for the Environment” event because she had to work.

Finally, Connie attended the fewest events, only three of the eight. She stated that she attended all events she could, but with four children, she had little free time. She said that if the teacher requested a conference, however, she would find the time to attend.
These six participants were involved in their children’s early childhood education. Mike and Laura also recalled their parents attending every conference and school event. Mike was pleased that contemporary parents had more activities on a wider variety of topics available to them than parents of the past, but he believed they were busier than parents in the past.

From the analysis in this section, one may conclude that the participants lacked a clear idea of the play-based curriculum at Commercial Preschool, which in turn allows one to conclude that they were guided by a different set of considerations when choosing this facility for their children. The majority of parents considered readiness more important than play in the learning process. The present findings indicate that the parents required much more detailed information and training on various types of early childhood education and the outcomes of such education. The parents must also consider alternative choices for their children in the event that they have some specific needs, desires, or ambitions about their learning outcomes.

**Preschool as Preparation for the Future**

A deeper analysis of the three overarching themes—socialization, structure, and reputation—led to the following categories of findings as they relate to preschool as preparation for the future: academic readiness, social readiness, behavioral readiness, and parents’ fears associated with the need for readiness for the future. Analysis of the current findings indicates that all six parents were impacted by their past experiences in education. Depending on whether their experiences were positive or negative, they either chose the same path for their children or chose a completely different path for them,
respectively. Parents who enjoyed preschool and later schooling were eager to enroll their children in facilities similar to those they had attended, but those who had negative experiences with early childhood education enrolled their children for other reasons, such as to fill a need for care, for their children to fit in with other children in the neighborhood, to place their children in a school with a good reputation, to ensure their children opportunities for experiences different from their own, and to fill a perceived void in their own capabilities.

**Academic Readiness**

Discussing ways the parents viewed early childhood learning was essential to this research. A certain discrepancy existed between their personal experience with education and their visions for their own children. Four of the respondents interviewed had older children, so they knew what came next in the educational scheme of school districts in terms of format, methods, grades, and standardized testing. These parents voiced a negative attitude toward current educational practice, including standardized tests. All parents agreed that the method of assessment used in schools at the time of this research did not adequately reflect the level of their children’s knowledge, which was most notable in early education. The anxiety about grades was high among parents—despite their belief that testing did not reflect the true level of children’s knowledge. All six respondents agreed that their children needed more academic preparation from a very young age. Such beliefs derive from the importance placed on grades and GPAs during enrollment at a university or a college and in the pursuit of a job. With the emphasis on academic achievement and grades, many parents predictably feel that the
academics-based curriculum is what preschools should implement (MacNaughton & Williams, 2009). All six parents, regardless of how they felt about a play-based curriculum, felt the pressures associated with academic achievement, GPAs, and standardized testing and assessment.

As a result, parents face the dilemma of either letting their children develop at the pace and in the way with which they are most comfortable or preparing them in a more structured and disciplined fashion to further the perception of getting “ready for real school.” Even though only four participants had had a glimpse of what was to come, all six parents mentioned structure as an important aspect of early childhood education, indicating that the four parents with older children who had experienced more of the educational process wanted their children to be prepared in the sense that they would conform to structured practices.

Donna had not attended preschool, so her earliest memory of school was that of kindergarten. Her fondest memories related to structure: She remembered her teacher, her desk, and the classroom. She described her experience as a “great time,” which to her meant sitting at a desk and listening to the teacher. When asked whether she would want a similar experience for her son she said, “Yes, for sure!” She continued:

There was not a lot of free choice, for what I remember the whole day was structured . . . even structured play. I believe we had gym time, so that was really the only free play we had, so I don’t recall there being fun, free play. I remember it being very structured.
Donna stated that it was fun to have structured play and studies, indicating that she equated structure with academics. She enjoyed the process of listening to teachers and learning through study. Judging from her past experience, Donna stated that she would like the same experience for her son Aaron. She said:

I think structure is very important even to little ones like the importance of schedule when they’re infants and routines, so I do want him to have some sort of structure. I know that if it’s a true curriculum, there’s going to be structure to it anyways. I am assuming that Aaron is going to be the same way, to learn by doing. So if there’s something that’s going to have structure with hands-on learning, that’s the experience I want him to have.

I believe that parents equated structure and academics. Preparation for academics was a theme that developed during the interviews with the participants. All six stated that they perceived the primary importance of preschool education to be the preparation of their children for their educational futures in contrast with Dewey (1938), who believed that education is not preparation for life: Education is life itself.

Patty’s life story also supported her attitude toward preschool and kindergarten education, which was strongly influenced by her childhood experiences. Patty was not so concerned about socialization as she was about structure. She had not attended preschool, but she attended kindergarten; and her earliest memory of it was not good. She said that the teacher was not “warm and fuzzy, and we did flashcards all the time.” Patty believed that kindergarten had not prepared her for first grade at all. Her lack of confidence in her own preparation for elementary school explained the watchful eye she
kept over her older daughter's grades, study habits, and progress. During interviews
Patty stated that she was very demanding with regard for her children’s studies:

   We tell all of our kids, “We expect you give it your 100%, strive for every point
   possible. Cs are not acceptable, and obviously anything less than that is you’re
   kind of in big trouble.” Um, I do watch their grades with the current school
   system. I watch her grades every single day.

This fragment revealed Patty as a very careful, watchful mother who tried to inspire her
children to study hard; however, as soon as she launched into her own early childhood
experience, she revealed that her past experiences contributed to her attitude toward her
children’s education, including her four year currently enrolled at Commercial Preschool.
When asked whether she thought her parents had academic goals for her, she gave a one
word answer: “No.” I followed with a probing question about whether they paid
attention to grades or were strict, and she expanded her answer:

   Um, well, yes and no. Um, you didn’t bring home anything less than a C. But if
   you did, then you were grounded. . . . There was no help. . . . You failed. I don’t
care why you failed—you failed.

Patty’s strict upbringing and past experience with education supported her current
concerns and issues with her daughter at Commercial Preschool. Patty conferenced with
her daughter’s teachers, requesting work sheets to practice at home. Patty shared her
worries about kindergarten readiness and Gabby’s academic progress. She felt that drill
and skill would prepare her for school success.
Two participants, Laura and Donna, who preferred a play-based curriculum or what they knew of it at Commercial Preschool, had memories about their time in school spent sitting at desks, being quiet, listening to teachers, and having a lot of homework. Although the play-based curriculum sounded like best practice for young learners, the concern that they may not be adequately prepared for the next level plagued all the parents and strongly influenced their choices for their children, including these two parents who agreed they liked play.

Donna said:
I think kids learn everywhere: grocery store, friends’ houses, et cetera, so yes, I know they’re learning through play; but I also think that preschool is the opportunity to learn basics to build on, to provide a good start to his education, and that I’m not sure happens through play.

Laura asserted:
Play to me is interacting with others in different types of atmospheres and circumstances or areas set up to reinforce [it]. I absolutely believe learning occurs during play time, but I also know as I have two older sons what happens when they get to school. Sadly, it’s not play. So whether I believe it in or not—it’s hard to 100% support because it’s not reinforced at the next level.

Finally, evidence shows that these parents believed early childhood education facilitates future education. When choosing a school for their children, reputation was a recurring theme; and reputation seemed closely linked to academic readiness, which again referenced the structure theme in preparing children to be successful in elementary
school. Reputation in this sense translated to quality; therefore, a good reputation meant quality, quality meant success, and in this case success meant structure, and structure meant academics.

**Social Readiness**

All six participants presented socialization as a reason to attend preschool. Some placed more emphasis on this need than others. Mike and Jennifer, who each had only one child, felt their children needed to be around other children to learn to get along with others and to share. Connie, Laura, and Donna felt socialization was important because their sons were the youngest of their children; therefore, they needed the opportunity to interact with children of the same age. Patty felt that socialization was an important factor but not so important as structure and readiness.

Throughout the interviews, the participants were asked to recall their own early learning experiences to understand how their past may have affected what they believed to be best for their own child’s early learning experience. Even though they all had limited memory of this period in their lives, their stories were compelling. All but one participant found socialization to be a primary factor in their decision to send their children to preschool.

The research findings indicate varying results in terms of the impact of parents’ experiences on the choices the respondents made for their children. In case of Mike, one can see the direct impact of his happy childhood on his striving to give the best and the most to his son: Mike was a single father, who tried to compensate for the lack of attention he was able to give his son by reducing insistence on his high expectations.
During his own childhood, Mike’s mother did not work but instead dedicated her time to her family. Mike attended preschool to learn to socialize with people, and he hoped his son would do the same. In the interview Mike said: “Although I had siblings, I believe my parents sent me to preschool to interact with other kids. They wanted me to start to understand how to socialize with others. Considering what I do for a living—I am grateful.” Mike had relied on his strong communication skills to make a living and therefore valued socialization as an important preschool skill; however, despite the fact that he appreciated the early educational experience, he found little academic value in it. He said:

I think at this age it’s not so much education as it is social environment. The fact that he is exposed to learning, uh, is good. They get to this age where, I’m like, you need more social interaction, so that’s important at this age.

In this fragment, Mike did not presuppose any structure or goal orientation in his son’s preschool education at all; he associated preschool education only with the acquisition of certain necessary social skills. Even though it has been scientifically proven that early childhood is one of the most important formative periods affecting a child’s learning potential (Bronson, 2001; Kopp, 1991), the learning of social skills was what he found important.

The impact of parents’ past experiences on their children’s education was also evident in the situation of Jennifer, who lost her mother when she was young. Nurtured by her grandparents, who were deaf, she did not attend preschool but attended kindergarten although she remembers little about it. She did not harbor any negative
attitudes about her childhood; however, when speaking of her daughter, she indicated that she wanted another future for her. What’s more, she wanted her daughter to choose it for herself. She said:

I remember everyone saying I was quiet and shy, but I really don’t think I was. I lived with deaf grandparents—everything was quiet. We learned to sign very early. I guess I want to make sure Gabby learns to socialize with others. I want her to be able to play with other kids her age. In today’s society, where kids are doing very little communication . . . [other than] texting, emailing, I hope that she gains and retains needed social skills.

Difficult and nontraditional early childhood years made Jennifer very open about what she wanted for her daughter. She would undoubtedly be attentive and caring when assisting her daughter in her academic development.

Connie attended preschool, but her experience was negative; she confessed to disliking it:

I was very quiet—didn’t really want to talk to anybody—and I liked art and music. . . . I think that’s why—I don’t remember—because I was real quiet and I really didn’t get an interest from anybody. So I kind of just stayed to myself because I already knew what they were teaching.

Connie stated that she enjoyed art and music because studying those two subjects provided time and space to be alone in the classroom. She was able to express herself without too many restrictions and predetermined rules. Although she recalled a teacher
once telling her that her art project was “wrong,” Connie felt that preschool was the beginning of her education, but she believed her quiet demeanor hindered her progress:

I’m glad I went to preschool. If I started right in first grade or even kindergarten, I would have been even shyer, which could’ve led to real problems. Learning to socialize is very important. I feel like if I had a relationship with my teacher or other kids, I could’ve shared with what I already knew. I was too quiet to be a show off. I definitely feel that socialization is a key reason for preschool.

Connie attached considerable value to the studying that she did at home with her dad, who taught her much more than the preschool did. She believed that her dad managed to achieve a balance between studies and play; however, having hard times with her older son, Connie realized that a preschool education was very important because it modeled socialization. She said:

Definitely, yeah. Especially for him, I had such a hard time with him trying to get him to do, sit, and learn anything . . . and because he’s the baby, he really needs to be around kids his own age and learn to play and share.

As a child Laura felt no educational pressures at home, where attention from her mother involved cooking, baking, cleaning, and reading, which Laura enjoyed. She spent little time at play, but she did not feel she missed out. Laura’s knowledge and experience in early childhood education made the decision to send Mario to preschool obvious. She felt that she had enough experience in early childhood education to provide Mario with what he would need to be successful in kindergarten, but because he was the youngest of three, she felt a formal preschool could provide the social aspect. She said:
I just thought Mario would start here because he just likes to be around kids so much. He just wanted to be with other kids; he is so social. There aren’t any young boys in our neighborhood so social, and, sometimes, I was worried how he’d respond to teachers. I think during the early years children should learn about socialization and appropriate cooperation behaviors as well as learning about the teacher’s role in education.

As an educator Laura could provide her son an in-home preschool experience that would prepare him for kindergarten; however, she took her child to the preschool for the sake of letting him socialize, to learn to get along with other. She continued:

Even though our kids today do not spend a lot of time talking to each other—they’d rather email and text—I still think they need to get along with people, all people in all different situations. I couldn’t provide that for Mario at home.

Academic skills alone cannot guarantee a child success in school; socialization is strategically important as well. Laura stated that one of the most important factors in deciding to enroll Mario at Commercial Preschool was indeed socialization.

Donna explained the true value of preschool in terms of preparing children for kindergarten:

There are some kids who stay home that are learning the skills that they need on their own because they have interests, and then they have the educational choice that maybe their parents will have to for them. But the social element is definitely what they’re going to miss. So having the learning and the socializing together as
early as possible, I think, can only strengthen their position when they go off to kindergarten or start grade school. Donna reported many vivid childhood memories about her kindergarten and school experiences. She did not attend preschool. Donna’s family relocated at age four, and she remembered feeling a bit shy around new children. She believed that exposing Aaron to other children at preschool would help build social skills. She said, “I want Aaron to learn to get along with others. He is my only. He has two older step sisters; I think he needs to be with kids his own age.”

Mike, Donna, Jennifer, Laura, Connie, and Patty believed that relationships play an extremely significant role in their children’s lives. Overall, these parents thought that relationships created in early childhood are the strongest ones in a person’s life.

Talking about his earliest memories, Mike recalled his years spent in kindergarten with great pleasure. He recognized the value of the long-lasting relationships established during that period of life. He said, “I still have friends from kindergarten.” One of the most positive memories Mike associated with his preschool years was that of friendship. Mike wanted his son to have the same experience, believing that the friends his child made in kindergarten would remain close forever. Mike explained that he planned to leave Commercial Preschool after pre-K to enroll his son in the parochial elementary school so that he could associate with the children he would be with throughout his elementary years.

Jennifer also stated that close relationships were significant for her daughter’s quality of life. Reflecting upon the value of friends in children’s lives, she concluded,
“They have to have friends.” Jennifer asserted that it is natural for children to have friends with whom they spend free time or have conversations on topics of interest to them.

Donna agreed that friendship is an essential and helpful component in her children’s lives; however, she added that the most reliable relationships can be established with family members. For example, Donna recalled her early years when she and her mother became best friends:

My relationship with my mother—at this stage we are friends. She is probably one of my closest confidants, and I look for her advice and opinions, whatever specialty, as a mother, a grandma, and a woman, she may have.

Donna believed that friendship through respect with one’s own child is paramount for staying in touch for a long time, and living a happy life.

Patty appreciated friendship within her own family. Her daughters were friends with each other, but their relationship remained complex. She stated, “They can be the best of friends, but they are most of the time worst of enemies. They’re two totally different personalities. Morgan is very laid back; Gianna is very high strung.” Patty recognized the significance of family members’ friendship; at the same time, she believed that when friends’ personalities differ, sometimes it is very difficult to preserve close relationships.

Overall, Mike, Donna, Jennifer, and Patty were parents who thought about friendship within and beyond the family as an indispensable part of children’s lives. The parents’ answers suggest that they supported the following idea: “Friendships play an
important role in development and adjustment in several ways” (Furman & Berger, 2004, p. 382). The parents implied that in the context of parent–child relationships, a child finds an authoritative friend as reliable, supportive, and understanding as a parent.

Discussion of relationships with family and with peers arose, but limited conversation occurred on the relationship between the teacher and the child. In fact, Laura and Connie were the only two participants who mentioned relationships with early childhood teachers; they had been memorable and favored the same experience for their own children. The current age of bullying has left parents more concerned about peer relationships than those with teachers; thus, socialization was a priority.

Concern about socialization generated by the complexity of adult life and marginalization as a member of society were revealed by all as a common thread in the need for preschool education. The interviewed parents primarily feared that their children would not be accepted in their social surrounding. For example, Mike believed that his son needed to be a communicative person to be a decent member of society. He stated:

I think that there’s always going to be a need for face-to-face communication, and that’s something I tell him that all the time. . . . That’s the part the scares me. You don’t know how to have those conversations, and you don’t know how to interact with people, and that scares me. I do think that it’s going to be a difficult, difficult road. I think it will be a difficult road when it comes to friendships, business interactions, and relationships.
For Mike, a person who is not afraid of talking face to face is socially accepted. He knows that his son will no doubt become proficient in instant messaging on social networking websites and will rarely exercise the opportunity to have a face-to-face conversation even with his own parents and relatives, which causes natural concern for Mike.

At the same time, not all parents were equally concerned about the social level of their children and the impact it would have on their future success. For example, Laura thought that the social experiences her sons acquired in preschool would guide them in any situation. She mentioned that she put them in preschool to provide them with an opportunity to learn from other people, confident that doing so would afford a solid foundation for any career choice.

Jennifer admitted her concern about the social aspect of school. She feared that her daughter, as an only child, may have lacked some of the social skills that others have. For example, during her own childhood, Jennifer was always glad to interact with adults and teachers, perhaps a result of having no adult verbal communication at home, a consequence of being raised by grandparents who were deaf. Of her upbringing she said, “I loved it, and it was a warm atmosphere and welcoming so I was never afraid.” Jennifer was not sure that her daughter would experience the same positive emotions with regard to other people and interpersonal interaction with them. She felt that the lack of exposure and experience with other adults and children may have had a negative social effect on her daughter.
Patty placed great emphasis on the need for social skills as determiners of future success both in school and in life. Reflecting upon the significance of educational institutions in terms of cultivating these skills in children, she commented,

They need to expose themselves to a classroom if you will. The socialization—I think kids that don’t get that may have a harder time adapting to kindergarten. So I think if they have the preschool environment prior to kindergarten, at least that’s one that helps there.

Patty recognized the value of successful socialization in life and wanted her daughter to take advantage of the opportunities provided in school in order to be accepted by her peers. She argued that socialization through interaction with peers is a helpful instrument for a child on the path to a good life.

All participants believed that well-developed social skills were an important aspect of their child’s success in both school and life. Parents naturally desired social acceptance for their children. Rathus (2011) clarified children’s social acceptance (primarily by their parents and peers) in a preschool age as an extremely important indicator of their successful integration into society. The participants’ concerns about socialization were valid: They knew the importance of fitting into society.

Mike, Laura, and Donna thought that technology had revealed many opportunities to their children; at the same time, they believed that technology is no substitute for live communication. Jennifer, Patty, and Connie did not present their reflections on the role of technology in their children’s communication.
Mike admitted that his son was an advanced computer user, believing the child’s technical skills would help him in his future and professional life. At the same time, he recognized that extensive use of technology prevents face-to-face communication, considered a valuable form of social interaction. He stated, “Our kids are so into technology for a good reason. It’s got its plus, but they’re losing sight of social skills.” Mike was aware of the strengths and weaknesses of technology and wanted the technology in which his son engaged to enhance instead of block live conversations.

Laura also stated that conversations via technological devices are less necessary than traditional face-to-face talks. She thought that computers may have even diminished her children’s social skills; hence, she usually told her children, “You have to stop texting and Facebooking. You have to talk to your friends.”

Donna added that not only computers with their social networks limit children’s live conversations but also cell phones. She did not want to give her children mobile phones because she believed they are absolutely irrelevant in early childhood. It was not surprising that Donna disliked seeing her children playing with those who already had cell phones; she said, “You have the kids whose parents are totally inappropriate, giving a 6-year-old a cell phone, and then of course Bobby and Susy want it, too, because Sally had one.”

The participants recognized the general value of technology, but they did not think it was an alternative to live social interaction. They agreed that extensive use of digital devices may distort a child’s perception of reality and value of face-to-face conversations (Gibbons, 2011). Mike, Laura, and Donna held traditional views on human
communication and welcomed the presence of digital devices only if they served as facilitators in interpersonal communications.

**Behavioral Readiness**

Early childhood education is important in the overall formation of the child’s developmental patterns. Blenkin and Kelly (1996) emphasized the contribution of early childhood education to the development of the mind and the child’s rationality. Goodlad (1984) assumed that early childhood education was already loaded with intellectual development exercises, which contributed significantly to understanding the importance of preschool education. Play had also been found to contribute significantly to child development (Vygotsky, 1962, 1997). The social relationships of a child are vital for learning and development, and play is an essential component in the holistic approach to teaching, learning, and thinking.

Parents do not always base their arguments on scientific evidence because their factual knowledge about child development may be limited. Their beliefs and attitudes about the way children learn are often revealed in their decision-making process. Some parents believe that children learn best through skill and drill, others through hands-on activities, and still others through play. Once educators reflect upon the knowledge parents have, they may find proactive ways to inform parents about the essential components of early childhood education, promoting a full understanding of the complex processes occurring during preschool development. Moreover, beliefs about early childhood education often affect the factors determining parents’ selection of preschools and kindergartens, a choice that can indeed be decisive for their children’s academic
success. This issue required specific attention in the framework of this research; therefore, I needed to develop an understanding of the participants’ perception of the purpose of preschool.

The interview with Mike indicated that he valued early education. He said,

Um, [I] actually [valued education] more so in the younger years than I did in high school and college. Um, I sort of valued it more in [my] younger school and actually go in reverse order. . . . The more education I got, . . . the higher, the less value I saw in it, to be honest.

Despite Mike’s disappointment with the decline in his motivation to pursue higher education, his words are valid in the sense that younger children appear to be more motivated about education. The older they get, the more distracted from studies they become. Parents serve as important advocates for their children. They are charged with making important decisions on their behalf. Mike hoped that this early exposure to the preschool environment would provide the experiences for his son that he could not. He said:

I am not an educator. . . . I only know what I know. I think my mom filled in the gaps when we were young. Umm, but parents are so busy these days. A lot busier. So I have to believe and trust that he will get the foundation and will be able to transition to school and be like OK.

Early education is important. It provides powerful tools to prompt a child’s curiosity, making him or her want to investigate, explore, and stimulate academic inquiry in the future school years.
When Connie was asked about the importance of early education, she suggested that it was important for many reasons. Recalling that she had issues with her older son’s behavior prior to attending Commercial Preschool, she placed a high value on early education. Her comments included the following statement:

Um, I don’t think that there’s one thing. I think there’s a bunch of things that all go into that. Um, to get along with others, to share, to, you know, concentrate and learn different things, and to take that all in and all kinds of things. School is so important they need a good start. . . . It’s a long road.

Connie highly valued early education; she believed that it possessed a high educational potential for teaching children the basic issues and preparing them for further stages of their education. During the second interview, she included some other remarks about how she saw her son progressing in early education and how important the process was. She stated:

Because they learn more by being here, they don’t really know that they’re learning, but they are. So it’s still fun for them, and then they get all this new stuff they are engaged in it, and then you’ll see it come later. Just kind of snowballs from there.

Connie did not enjoy her preschool education but had learned much from her experiences here with both of her kids. She said:

My two older kids were cared for by family and sitters. When Bobby was kicked out of his first preschool, I didn’t know what to do. . . . When I found this place,
I realized how important it was for him to be here, but also how like I had to be active in this.

Like many parents who experienced behavioral challenges with their children, Connie realized the value of professional pedagogy and the intricacies of early childhood education. She appreciated the positive impact they had on child development.

Jennifer’s attitude toward early education was generally positive, and she stated she was confident that her daughter was learning at school; however, she admitted that she was unsure about the new methods, calling herself “old school.” Jennifer assumed she was in favor of standards, standardized testing, and structured learning even at this level, yet she voiced high regard for the value of preschool:

I think it [preschool]’s really important. I think if she were staying home with us, she wouldn’t have a lot of this basic core stuff. It’s more, again, more like the structure and less about the skills, including academia. Not that they don’t teach her great things at Commercial Preschool, and they do it in all different ways and challenge her because they do. But I liked tests; I did well on them, so I think they need to be ready for that.

Jennifer valued the early childhood experience her daughter received but also voiced some concerns about the early childhood education content. Later in the interview, she noted that it was important to her that her daughter learned to listen to adults and follow the various directions given to her.

During the first interview Patty stated that she did not wish her children to have the same educational experience as she had. She said that her earliest memories were not
fond memories. She recalled sitting a lot, and doing flash cards. Patty’s demands about her children’s education and grades may stem from her family culture. She was accustomed to having her academic progress tracked, but at the same time she realized the meaningfulness of punishment for poor grades. She knew that children can achieve better results if they are assisted. Because she had little assistance during her own childhood, she tried to combine the strict control over studies with assistance, tutoring, discussions, and any other help she could give to her children for the sake of contributing to their academic progress. During her interviews Patty placed more emphasis on the importance of academic preparation than on any other factors. She noted that preschool is important:

They need the exposure to a classroom base if you will. . . . I think kids that don’t get that may have a harder time adapting to kindergarten. So I think if they need the preschool environment prior to kindergarten, at least it can help. I think PS [preschool] is a practice elementary school. Kids need to learn to follow directions, sit, and work and get along with others. Georgia is a very strong-willed little girl. She needs to learn that she’s not the boss.

This statement showed the strong reliance on discipline and structure that Patty wanted for her children. Speaking about the practices at Commercial Preschool, she confessed that she liked the environment there. She believed it was clean and safe, but she expressed her concern for the degree to which her daughter would be prepared when she had to transfer her to elementary school. She said, “There’s no doubt Georgia is having fun and is learning, but how this will roll over. . . . We’ll see. I’m worried.”
Preschool as Filler of a Void

According to the findings of this study, families and schools have very important roles when it comes to the promotion of academic performance and positive development of children. When parents and educators work jointly as partners, important developmental opportunities are created, which produce emotional, academic, and social competencies. Two of these parents stated that they enrolled their children in Commercial Preschool because they felt they lacked the skills required to prepare them properly; therefore, when parents and educators work together for a common cause, the void that parents perceive is filled.

Providing Care

Donna’s ideas about early education were ambiguous. At first, she noted that she took her child to Commercial Preschool because she needed care for him. Subsequently, she admitted that she perceived the preschool organization as a true educational facility, and she was confident that teachers were indeed taking care of her son but were also “teaching him stuff, too.” Later in our conversation, Donna was ambivalent about whether she would have sent Aaron to preschool if she hadn’t needed care for him.

Umm, wow, I guess I don’t know because it wasn’t an option. He’s my only child. I think I’d like to say I would have kept him with me, but maybe because my husband’s two daughters went to preschool, he’d push for Aaron to go, too. I really don’t know. I feel like a bad mom if I say I would’ve sent him when I could’ve spent more time with him. On the other hand, all the kids in the neighborhood go to preschool. Maybe I would’ve just because they do. Not sure.
Donna believed that preschool should ensure proper and professional care for her son. She was pleased with the invaluable experience he acquired in socialization and learning. Her choice of Commercial Preschool was affected by her need for child care and its location. She appreciated its proximity to her home, but her job was 30 minutes away. Her main concern was to secure a safe, nurturing caregiver. Care was not mentioned by many of the participants. Other than Donna, only Laura spoke of their early childhood teachers as care givers.

**Providing What Parents Feel They Lack**

Parents’ perceptions of how children learn vary considerably. The most complex development period is early childhood, during this period children show that they learn quickly and comprehensively. Children in the early stages of child development do not reflect upon their learning experiences, nor can they consciously comprehend how they have assimilated knowledge and discipline; thus, these stages are somewhat complicated. Consequently, parents are often unclear about how their children learn. A lack of clarity concerning their children’s learning methods often distorts parents’ understanding of these processes. Understanding factors other than their individual cultures and their own experiences may motivate future research about how parents’ beliefs are formed.

Luster and Okagaki (2005) stated that parents usually adopt strategies for organizing the learning process of their children according to their own perceptions of their children’s learning abilities and needs. Some external factors, including the school’s reputation, location, and costs, also affect parents’ decisions to enroll their children in a particular school. They are usually important to varying extents to families;
for example, Connie reported that location did not matter for her at all, but the reputation of the school and her past experience with this school were the most important factors. Mike enjoyed the social connections that the school provided to him and his child. He became acquainted with other children from the neighborhood. He said of his son:

I’ve read articles about divorced parents and young kids and what may or may not be the best for him, like socialization, routines I did quite a bit of research on the school, but I didn’t ask anyone else like for references. And, actually, now going there, I’ve noticed I know more people here than I thought I did. Now I talk to them more. So I feel that we both gained.

An informed educator, Laura offered a grounded view of the factors that influenced her decision to take her son to the Commercial Preschool School. She visited other schools, read articles, and researched online. She said:

There’s a big gap between my older boys and Mario. I felt that I’ve been so far removed from preschool that I needed to familiarize myself, reengage with what’s going on in the field. But there was never a doubt that he would go. I felt he needed more than just a couple of hours like some traditional preschools are set up. I thought that would be a good setting for him because he is so social.

The preceding fragment shows the ways Laura constructed her beliefs about how her son learned: She was active and informed about different methods and programs.

Patty was driven by factors that included reputation, cost, and location. She contacted Commercial Preschool after seeing a TV commercial. She stated that during the tour she was impressed with the family like atmosphere and friendly, professional
teachers, all with degrees. She admitted that she had chosen Commercial Preschool after learning of its costly tuition. To Patty expensive tuition translated to success. She viewed the high price as an indication of quality. She said:

I was visibly shocked at the tuition, but after visiting other places, . . . I got it.

You know, you get what you pay for. And, for sure, Georgia would be prepared for school. And funny, though, when I told my neighbors that Georgia was going to Commercial Preschool, they were like “Whoooa, the Harvard of Preschools!”

Unsurprisingly Patty, who was constant about structure and readiness throughout the interview process, was influenced by the professional teachers and reputation, associating costly tuition with a guarantee for success.

Jennifer admitted that one of the factors that affected her decision was that the interaction between children, parents, and teachers was organized. She said:

I think the thing that I was most influenced by was the interaction that I observed between teachers and the children. Communication is what I do for a living. I think it is very important, and I felt that there would be a strong home school communication. I went there because I noticed it on the way home. I looked up the phone number and found there were a lot of them. I didn’t know that. So I guess location played into my initial decision to contact them.

Jennifer specified communication during her interview, and one would wonder how much of her nontraditional upbringing subconsciously crept into her thinking when making decisions for her daughter. Raised by her grandparents who were deaf, she communicated through sign language. Because of those experiences, Jennifer, whose
profession at the time of this writing was in communication, placed a high value on communication skills. Seeing how the teachers communicated with the children and encouraged communication among them was the highlight of her tour at Commercial Preschool.

Many outside factors played into parents’ decision for their child to attend preschool. Parents selected the type of school for numerous reasons, including location, affordability, and previous experience with the school. The common themes of socialization, reputation, and school readiness through structure continued to be the common thread.

**Discussion**

Societal trends are important in preschool education. According to the analysis of the interview responses, parents want their children to be prepared. Mike showed his concern about the importance of experience in his child’s life, and Laura felt public education might deprive children of play and creativity by replacing them with drill and skill and test taking. Laura believed that a good education was an important factor in determining her son’s future. Overall, she hoped that he would become a good provider, and she felt a good education was necessary to enable him to fulfill this role. Donna and Connie indicated their fears related to the inability of their children to motivate themselves. Donna’s son was the youngest of three, and she admitted that they all were guilty of babying him and thought that his delayed developmental progress might have been their fault. She felt that his lack of drive or motivation affected his academic
development, which would remain a pressing issue throughout his education and into his future as an adult.

Connie referred to her “overnurturing as a potential hazard.” Because he had three older siblings, Connie felt that her youngest son had been exposed to much more at an earlier age than the average child; therefore, she was in no rush to push him and place demands on him. She was not worried about grades and was confident that he would do well if he wanted to. His lack of motivation concerned her with regard to his academic progress. She said, “His future is up to him.” Connie knew that if he were happy, he would be successful no matter what he did in life.

Jennifer’s responses indicated a different form of concern. Her daughter, an only child, marches to the “beat of a different drum” according to Jennifer. Her interest in music and the arts caused concern for Jennifer as she the child approached elementary school. Jennifer felt that a traditional education might not have been the right fit for her. She feared that cuts in budgets would force schools to eliminate music and art, forcing her daughter down a different path, not one of choice, “doing a job you don’t like.”

Patty’s strict and rigid views of education showed her strong belief in the connection between good grades and future success. This was evident throughout the data analysis as Patty shared going to her daughter’s teachers and asking them to regulate how much playtime her daughter had, requesting minimal dramatic play opportunities, asking to have worksheets to work on at home. She mentioned numerous times that poor grades were not an option. Patty stated that getting good grades meant a job, which meant a good life.
Wanting a certain quality of life for their children, the participants worried that their children might not have easy lives ahead of them. For example, Mike recognized the importance of experience. He remembered his perception of fatherhood when he became the single parent of his son. He said:

Nobody told me how to deal with a child or nobody told me how to deal with this situation. That’s life. I mean, it’s scary, but you’re so right about that. When you have the experience at first and then you have to go backwards, it’s a little difficult.

In other words, as a father, Mike recognized the value of personal experience in life, and he wanted his son to learn from his own experiences because doing so is extremely helpful in an adult life.

Laura feared that the public school system with its focus on standardized testing would negatively influence her children’s lives in the future, yet at the same time she believed that her children would have good and successful lives regardless of their enrollment at public schools. She recalled her own negative past experience: “I had a hard time, and the reason why I left public education was because our curriculum was being dictated by the standardized test.” Laura worried that the excessive focus on drill of academic skills in public education might have a negative impact on her children’s future lives; nevertheless, she believed that her own teaching experience would help her sons to succeed in their lives.

Donna was concerned that her children might not understand the necessity of completing work before play. She observed children playing in her son’s classroom and
was concerned with the message sent. She was afraid that they might not learn the essential lesson of life: “You need to do what you have to do so that you can do what you want to do later.” In other words, she believed in a time to play and have fun distinct from a time to work hard. For this reason, she always tried to let her children see that first of all, people should fulfill their responsibilities; and only then might they do whatever they wanted, like play.

Connie was afraid that her son might not do his best to gain a decent quality of life in the future. In her words, she wanted him “to grow up and be the best person he can be and get as far in life as he can. Follow his dreams.” Connie wanted her child to succeed in life by working hard, following his heart, and remaining true to himself. In addition, she admitted how significant it is to “be smart and utilize everything that he possibly can.” Perhaps Connie did not want her child to repeat her mistakes, and her wishes regarding the son’s happy future may have been based on her own life experience. She feared that her child might not be so successful in life if he did not learn to get along with all types of people and get good grades. She realized that the negative experiences in her life (divorced parents, dislike of school) drove her to guide her children otherwise.

Overall, parents’ fears about the likelihood of their children having hard lives were justified. Aware of the complexities of their own lives, they realized the necessity of benefiting from personal experience, doing one’s best in school, enjoying what one did for a living, following one’s own nature, and improving oneself continuously. E. Johnson (2011) provided an explanation of parental fears about children’s future and quality of life, revealing that these fears are rooted in the natural desire of parents to help
their children avoid their own mistakes and to protect them from all adversities. E. Johnson added, however, that these parental fears usually went hand in hand with the reluctance to realize that children have their own right to make decisions about what they want and who they want to be. From E. Johnson’s perspective, the interviewed parents who expressed their fears about their children’s future lives needed to accept that their children may have their own individual talents and dreams, which may be completely different from those of the parent. For this reason, the intentions of Mike, Laura, Jennifer, Patty, Donna, and Connie to guide their children in their lives are natural; at the same time, they should remember that their children are individuals who have the right to choose their own life paths. At this stage doing so can be accomplished by respecting children’s independence—as difficult as it may be—and by minimizing directing, instructing, and correcting but instead allowing them the opportunity to choose by involving them in the process of making decisions about their activities, clothes, food, books. Allowing children to develop confidence in their own ideas and choices can empower them. This is the beginning of choosing their own life paths.

All the participants were loving parents, so it was not surprising that they all wanted their children to pursue fulfilling careers. Mike’s and Donna’s fears about the professional future of their children coincided to a certain extent because both parents were concerned that their children would not have either the necessary social skills or the academic preparation that would help in their careers. Unlike them, Laura showed no fears about her children’s future professional success; she admitted that her children’s
preschool education maximized their learning foundation, increasing the chances of making the right choices in education, leading to a successful career choice.

Mike believed his son needed to be involved in technology-related activities. Because Mike had a career in technology and because the boy had been exposed to it all his life, Mike believed that his son was naturally curious about it and was driven toward it. At the same time, he recognized that being a socially successful person was as essential as building a brilliant career. Commenting about his younger brother who had a great career, Mike stated, “He just didn’t have any interest in technology, math, and science. He was more of a—he’s very good socially. Kind of person who walks into the room and everybody likes him.” Mike feared that his son might not be successful from a social perspective, regardless of the fact that he may succeed in his career. To Mike, being socially skilled was an important life skill.

In contrast, Laura did not fear that her children would have career issues. Laura believed that a successful career went hand in hand with well-developed social skills; a person succeeds in a professional sphere only when he or she knows “how to work with other people and adjust yourself to them,” she said. Laura thought that her sons would be successful in their careers, because they obtained the necessary social skills that were developed in the preschool.

Donna worried that her children might not build successful careers if they did not recognize the importance of working hard in all aspects of life, including education. At the same time, she did not think that an excellent GPA necessarily guaranteed that a child would succeed in a professional life. For example, Donna argued, “A GPA is something
that you put on your resume for the first maybe five years of your career, and no one cares.” Donna was afraid that her children might treat their GPAs too seriously. For this reason, she was preoccupied with her children’s reluctance to develop themselves beyond the school establishment. Overall, Donna’s key point was that on one hand, good academic performance might not necessarily guarantee that a child would obtain a fulfilling career in the future. On the other hand, a poor GPA might negatively influence the children’s prospects for college and later in professional life. To acquire a strong work ethic was essential early on in school.

Laura, Donna, Jennifer, and Mike shared their views on the role of success in their children’s lives. For these parents, success in early years was paramount for a child’s life satisfaction and well-built professional career.

Laura believed that success in preschool years was indispensable for children’s lives. She thought that the more social interaction her children had in kindergarten, the greater were their prospects for becoming socially successful individuals. Laura’s positive reaction regarding success in preschool years was true for kindergarten and beyond. She said, “I think it contributes all around success definitely.”

Donna argued that success was obviously an essential element in children’s lives; however, she admitted that success could be achieved even beyond school. She noted that “it’s not the learning element. It’s the social element.” Donna believed that success in today’s world extended not only to school but also included interaction at home and on the playground as well as other social places.
Jennifer thought that success in early years maximized children’s chances to succeed in a professional life. She added that children should be involved in competition to understand the extent to which success is important. Commenting upon her daughter’s current experience in preschool, she said, “I think to compete in things and to be successful is an important life skill. That’s just the area that she’ll have experience with competition, losing [the concept of] working toward a goal.” Jennifer wanted her child to be a strong competitor in the early years in order to become successful in adult life.

Mike added that high results on tests might bring the feelings of success and satisfaction. He noted that “the competition or the willingness to learn and be able to handle those tests is going to determine what he considers success.” Mike believed that success in childhood increased the chances to succeed in life and career in particular.

Overall, Laura, Donna, Jennifer, and Mike believed that success in early years is significantly important to success in life in general. Their answers reflected Joseph’s (2007) idea about a parent’s essential task being to prepare children for tomorrow’s world by raising resilient individuals striving for success.

Parents’ fears about children’s professional future reflected diverse positions; according to the participants’ answers, some parents believed that having a successful career was as important as a being socially developed person; others thought that academic achievements might not necessarily favor successful career building. Hayashino and Chopra (2008) stated that a career choice may often become the reason for parent–child disagreements. Choosing a professional future for a child is not a parent’s primary task, yet it appears to be an issue of concern. Although Mike, Laura,
Jennifer, Patty, Connie, and Donna had their own attitudes about their children’s careers, they were loving and caring parents, whose fears were related to their natural desires to prepare their children for successful professions.

Throughout their interviews parents espoused middle-class social and cultural norms. They saw the need to inform their children about what society expects from them and how to conduct themselves accordingly, and in turn educators must convince the general public that children are also humans requiring fair treatment and having their rights respected.

According to Bergen (2002), children are a vulnerable group, often denied their rights as humans, a situation that must be addressed by all governments to ensure that the rights of the children are protected. In addition, the respondents indicated that some of them were not aware of certain issues affecting their children while in school, such as their right to play, current testing and standardized curriculum issues. Keeping parents informed of issues that affect the rights of their children and their voices is the responsibility of educators. Keeping parents updated and current on issues, trends, and policies builds trust and provides support throughout their educational experience.

**Summary**

The purpose of Chapter 4 was to present interview findings: Six respondents whose children attended Commercial Preschool at the time of this writing were interviewed three times. The findings were divided into categories according to the research questions: (a) parents’ past experiences in education that influenced their choice
of preschool education for their children, (b) parents’ past experiences of their own education, and (c) parents’ goals for the early education of their children.

Results concerning the goals of parents for their children’s futures were varied, ranging from the nebulous general goals to the specific plans. The ways the participants thought about the implications of early learning also varied because each was influenced by personal and individual experiences and situations. In terms of early education, some parents placed considerable value on socialization. Some indicated that early education provides a strong foundation for future academic success. Other responses indicated that parents simply wanted their children to interact with other children. To summarize, the main reasons for the participants’ taking their children to preschool were socialization, preparation for the future, and interaction with other children.

In addition, the interviewed parents’ answers indicated fear. This looming fear surrounding their children’s achievement, quality of life, future career, and social acceptance showed that parents want to protect their children from misfortunes, hardship, dissatisfaction, and unhappiness, all of which according to them begin in preschool. Providing a strong solid send-off at the beginning of their academic journey may pave the way for their success in school and in life. In the interviews parents revealed their concerns about their children’s personalities, believing that their children should be positively influenced by society (mainly parents, teachers, and peers), learn by their personal experiences, actively interact with others, adopt some adult character traits (such as responsibility, self-consciousness, and reasonableness), and play in order to explore the world. Furthermore, the parents were interested in their children’s communication,
encouraging them to make friends and to achieve success in their social surrounding; however, their answers also implied their desire for their children to be conscious of the potential deterrents of technology, encouraging face-to-face communication over online conversations.

In this research study parents’ beliefs and attitudes toward play-based early childhood curriculum were examined; they reflected on their past experience, their goals, and their knowledge of the curriculum. According to Sigel and McGillicuddy-De Lisi (2002), parents’ beliefs are affected by the unique culture to which they belong and are determined by their individual childhood experiences. Parents’ behavior with regard to their children supposedly reflects their own experiences: Depending on the perceptions they formed as a result of those experiences, they strive to repeat them if they consider their own childhood successful or will try to change them if they were dissatisfied.
CHAPTER V

FINDINGS: THE NATURE OF KNOWLEDGE

Future plans and aspirations that parents have for their children often reflect aspects of childhood as they experienced it. Given the current organizational structure of the educational system in the US, Garcia (2003) suggested parents’ plans should be realistic, aligned with the intellectual abilities of the child and the financial resources of the family. Parents who found pleasure in their early childhood experience and success as adults typically want to duplicate their experience for their children, relating their success to their past learning experiences; but anything that they have not experienced may not count as learning in their opinions.

What Counts and Does Not Count as Learning

Academics

Education was important to Laura’s parents. A teacher, Laura attributed her success in school to their positive attitudes toward education. She said:

Because my mom was always in the school and very active, and I would go with her, my siblings and I thought, I think, that mom was one of them. . . . She respected all of our teachers. I think if my parents were negative or not involved, it would’ve been different for me.

Laura also felt fortunate to have had teachers who left strong, positive impressions on her. She said, “Actually, uh, when I was visiting preschools, I found myself thinking back to my early childhood experiences and wanting Mario to have the same warm, loving, caring teacher that would make him feel safe and secure enough to blossom.”
Regarding her personal aspirations for Mario’s future, Laura indicated that she wanted him to bring home straight As because

like it or not, it is the reality, the future, for these kids as I have seen with the older boys in high school to remain motivated, to do his best. I have no reason to think that Mario will not bring home good grades. I guess I expect As, but grades really don’t mean anything. It is a standard means of evaluation . . . . To me, I guess that means he achieved his goals according to them. . . . I think, on the other hand, I want to see him engaged, active, exploring, and investigating, like really enjoying learning. That’s my measurement.

Laura discussed her belief that one of her older sons could have done much better in some areas, but she had not pressured him. Merely pointing out that results could have been much better had he exerted more effort, she believed her comments would serve to make him self-motivated. Laura felt that if she and her husband, with the help of the schools, provided a solid foundation for education, their children could proceed from that point and become independent for life. Her position was credible because she listened to her children’s voices and considered their viewpoints, made no strict demands on them but, provided them the freedom of choice. She said,

I feel if you are active in your child’s life, . . . if you talk to them and you share your expectations, you support, guide, and listen to them, . . . unless there is a problem, learning should be fun and should happen automatically.

Mike also wanted his son’s experiences to replicate his own. He wanted to provide the same positive, solid, traditional home life for his son that he had had; but now
a single parent, he could no longer do so. Although his son was only three years old, the only thing Mike wanted for him was for him to be a gentleman and to find a good job. Mike had no clearly shaped expectations because he was unsure that his son would want to pursue higher education. Mike personally felt better at work than in college. He had a college degree but had not achieved his highest potential in academic studies. He confessed, “It just wasn’t my cup of tea.” Thus, he felt that he could not push or expect his son to seek higher education. Mike said, “He will go to college; his mother and I do agree on that: In today’s world, college is required. But that is all I can ask of him.” In his views Mike aligned with Blevins-Knabe and Musun-Miller (1996), who stated that parents’ attitudes influence their goals for their children’s education.

Jennifer’s interview revealed ambitious goals for her daughter’s future. Jennifer, who felt empowered to provide assistance, guidance, attention, and support, believed that Gabby would be her only child. Although Jennifer did not feel that her childhood had been difficult, she recognized that she missed out in some way, having no mother and living with grandparents who were deaf. Jennifer recognized the individuality of her daughter and wanted her to choose the life path to pursue. She said:

I think that what interests her isn’t always the same as the other kids, so I know that she is really interested in music—you know, more the creative side. I was more focused on studying and the boring math. She has a totally different mind. She loves music; she loves art. So I don’t remember any of that growing up. Jennifer’s comments do not align with the findings of Blevins-Knabe and Musun-Miller (1996) about the influence of parents’ beliefs on the developmental outcomes of their
children. Confessing to loving math in her childhood, Jennifer did not push her daughter in academic studies but instead stimulated her interest in arts and music, which she may have missed in her own upbringing. Jennifer may have looked critically at her own childhood, development, and growth and perhaps decided to let her daughter have more freedom of choice for the sake of achieving what she desired from life. She said:

I want Gabby to have the opportunities that I didn’t. I put myself through college and so did my husband. I don’t want her to go through college and get a degree and get a job because that’s what your degree is in and then realize you don’t like it.

The parents in this study who were satisfied with their childhood, education, career, and life in general tended to impose their beliefs on their children; while, those dissatisfied with their achievements wished more for their children and thus made different decision in the hopes it may help their children travel down a different path in life.

Patty voiced unwillingness to see her child repeat experiences similar to hers, especially in education. She wanted her children to be successful at school, to earn good grades, to be involved, and to enjoy it as well. One may assume that her plans for her children’s future were much more ambitious than hers had been. Patty stated that she had to enroll her older daughter Margo in a public school because she had been unable to afford a private school as a single mother. In the case of her two younger children, she had the finances and the support of a husband; so she enrolled both at Commercial Preschool, preferring private education for them. Patty wanted to provide a good
education for her children. In particular, she wanted her daughter Georgia to become more involved in activities. She felt that the more diverse the activities to which children were exposed, the better. She said:

Georgia would stay in dramatic play all day. I’ve talked with her teachers. I want them to get her out and about; she needs to see all the other stuff, math, science centers. I see her more into competitive stuff like that—gymnastics. Just her build is more for that; her ambition is more for that, you know, constantly jumping and playing. . . . I don’t want her to do stuff because Margo did it like volleyball or softball, you know. So I want her to be her own person, but whatever she does she has to do it her best—give it her all, you know.

Patty was an inspiring mother who stimulated her children and wanted them to succeed in life. She continued, “I tell my kids, ‘You have to strive for every possible point. Like Cs are not acceptable in this house.’ But like I wouldn’t ground them for nine weeks because like that didn’t work for me.”

Patty’s desire for her children’s success was also visible in the way she tried to intervene in the learning process and to accelerate it in the areas in which her daughter seemed to lag behind. Patty saw the relationship between her active involvement in her children’s early education and future lives; therefore, she tried to take part in the education of her children. She tried, for example, to follow the curriculum for Georgia in terms of what she did and did not know. She said:

Well, and I’ve also told Beth [Georgia’s teacher] that, you know, I’m going to get more involved, too. So now that I know what letter she’s working on, we’ll work
on that letter. I know what letter we did last week and the week before that. So I
won’t go ahead, but we won’t go back. . . . I am very concerned. She’s going to
kindergarten in the fall, and she doesn’t know any letters. None. My other
daughter knew all her letters at this age. I’ve requested worksheets to do at home
with Georgia so I can teach her letters.

Patty’s observation reflected how her past experiences affected her beliefs about study.
She said, “No one helped me at home, and there was no discussion. If we failed, it was
“You failed. I don’t care why you failed. You failed!”

Strict control over academics may lead children to take their studies seriously. On
one hand such control may help parents detect gaps and challenges and identify areas of
struggle, which will ultimately help children improve their outcomes. On the other, the
pressure may cause stress, resulting in children doing poorly and disliking both school
and learning. Children learn and achieve academic success with parents’ support
occurring in a nonthreatening way.

Connie was fairly relaxed about her son’s future. She did not have any fixed
future goals for Tommy but stated, “Really, just grow up and be the best person he can be
and get as far in life as he can. Follow his dreams. . . . Be smart and utilize everything
that he possibly can.” Tommy was the youngest of Connie’s four children. She seemed
content letting him grow and develop into the person he was meant to be. Connie
experienced some behavior issues with her older son, which led her to Commercial
Preschool. She was so pleased with his progress that she enrolled her younger son
Tommy. She said, “Tommy’s my baby. Being the baby, he had some behavioral issues.
He has three older siblings. We baby him, you know. So I knew when we got him here that we see him get better at things.”

Connie’s somewhat relaxed views on academics stemmed from her own unpleasant experience in her early learning years. Connie had skipped a grade in elementary school and felt doing so had hindered her progress because she was already a quiet and shy girl. Her experiences influenced her attitudes toward her older son’s situation. She said:

Bobby was kicked out of his other preschool. They told me he should see a doctor for ADHD medication. I was like, What?! I couldn’t really afford it here, but, you know, you do what you have to for your kids. He did so well here. They really loved him. When he went to elementary school, they wanted him to skip a grade, too. I said, “No way!” So they placed him a gifted class. So that’s why I don’t really feel I need to push Tommy. He’ll be fine.

Connie’s parents could not afford college, and she was not interested in attending. She said, “I guess like, I wonder sometimes if I went . . . like how would my life be? But, like, I’m content. If my kids want to go, I’ll try to make it happen.” Although Connie did not have fond memories of her early childhood educational experience and education in general, she was able to use her unpleasant experience as a guide while she made educational decisions for Tommy and her other children.

Donna was also strongly influenced by the past experiences, and she made projections about her child’s future based on her perspective. Pondering her son’s future,
she first recalled her behavior in school, assuming that her child would be the same. She said:

I was somewhat lazy in college. It was almost like I had to reteach myself skills to be disciplined, to do the work, to study the bookwork because nothing was hands-on. It was teach at me. I’ll take my notes, book reading, but it was never hands-on. . . . And I just believe that Aaron is the same way. And it’s going to be important to me. Almost, if we have to go to nontraditional school, I would like to see him—I would like to tap into his talents and have him learn the way he needs to learn, so whatever that means. But that was one of the reasons or one of my criteria in his very early childhood education.

Donna’s statements illustrate how parents’ beliefs affect the choice of certain educational institutions, curricula, and methods. Donna relied exclusively on her life experience, her emotions, her failures and successes, without considering the fact that her son’s life might move in a different direction. He might learn differently, and her experience might be completely irrelevant for him. The way she formed her judgments about his future parallels the way beliefs are typically formed. These examples show how educators can affect parents’ beliefs.

As an educator Laura presented very informed and balanced views on early childhood learning, stating,

Well, I think preschool is necessary now for readiness for kindergarten and elementary. I just think that you know kids that unless they are homeschooled [for] preschool, preschool wise, . . . they may be somewhat behind—whether it’s
socially or in the content areas—because society has moved toward that readiness as a marker, an indicator

This dad and these moms are all caring and well intentioned parents. They seek to provide their children with the tools and foundation to be successful in school. Academic pressures are already seeking into their minds; does he/she know her numbers and letters should he/she be completing worksheets, when will he read, are questions that cause parents to fret over how to give their child an edge on their education. An academic based instruction is a familiar tradition for these adults.

Play

Comprehension of the school’s curriculum is an essential factor influencing the decision to choose a particular preschool or kindergarten for children. Thus, in order to make sure their children are receiving the best education possible and are learning in a way they would approve, parents must be fully informed about the curriculum practiced in the educational establishment in which they enroll their children. Qadiri and Manhas (2009) noted that the majority of parents evaluate play highly in terms of its role in early childhood education; however, the findings of Singer, Golinkoff, and Hirsh-Pasek (2006) and Hirsh-Pasek et al. (2003) indicate an opposing point of view. The increasing reliance on learning reading and writing and the growing obsession of parents with standardized testing induce them to make different choices for different school curricula. The way the curriculum at the Commercial Preschool was presented to parents and how they perceived, therefore, laid the groundwork for their reasoning when deciding between a play-based and a nonplay-based curriculum for their children.
Play engages the senses, the cognitive process, and the emotions of the child. Puzzles, dolls, and pretend play involve critical thinking, creativity, and imagination, all critical for cognitive development (Christie, 2001). The interviews showed a major discrepancy between parents’ beliefs about what they wanted for their children and their level of knowledge about the curriculum of Commercial Preschool.

For example, Patty wanted her daughter to be prepared academically, so she resisted the play-based curriculum. She said:

> Play to me is fun time. Play in preschools should be like recess. Preschool should not be all play. Kids need to learn to sit quietly and listen. There needs to be more of that in order to prepare for school.

When asked whether she felt that children learned through play, Patty stated:

> I guess, but I think it needs to be reinforced by an adult. I think if adults don’t guide them, they’ll play all day and never do anything that they don’t like or, like, is hard for them. Like Georgia would play in dramatic play all day. I think to prepare for school, they should be directed and monitored at all areas.

Donna originally contacted Commercial Preschool for care but was surprised and pleased with the learning that occurred. Donna noted that she was informed about the play-based curriculum during a parent meeting at Commercial Preschool, which reinforced her decision to enroll her son there. She said:

> I don’t think I knew how important it would be for him at his age. It wasn’t until he started—he was probably in the transition room. Then we ended up hearing one of the directors for the compliance, individuals came out, and we attended
one of the seminars after hours, explaining it to us. I thought, “Oh that makes so much sense.” That’s how Steve and I would have excelled at school because if it is fun, it’ll keep your attention; and if you’re learning, you do not really know you’re learning.

Attending a parent information meeting after hours introduced Donna to the play-based curriculum at Commercial Preschool. She stated her approval of the method and wanted to read more about it in order to help her son.

Jennifer presented little sound evidence that she knew the nature of the curriculum at Commercial Preschool. She noted that the reputation of the school and the awards it had won were important to her. When asked what play meant to her, Jennifer responded:

Play time means doing something you enjoy—heck, I say to my colleagues that I play at work because I am simply having fun. I think preschools should play a lot. . . . When I pick up my daughter, she’s always playing smiling, having fun. I asked, “Do you think kids learn through play?”

She answered:

For sure. The kids were playing Olympics. They must be talking [about] the upcoming summer Olympic games, and the girls were having their dolls be from other countries, pointing out London on a map. No one told them to that. They—that’s learning!

Laura was aware of the play-based curriculum and felt it was the best for young children. Saddened by the loss of it in schools, she said:
As I was doing my homework, trying to get caught up in early childhood, I read the literature online about Commercial Preschool’s play-based curriculum. I was convinced. I would need to have a really bad feeling when I went for a tour to change my mind; I loved what I saw and thought my other boys are sitting unengaged, preparing for state tests. Ugh.

As a father, Mike wanted the best for his child, so he delved deeply into the curriculum. He simply chose the best option available. In the interview he noted:

It had the reputation of being my best possible option overall as far as how he is taken care of, ratio of people taking care of him to, you know, students . . . . I felt that my parents sacrificed a lot for me and my younger brother, younger sister, for education. And I thought it was important. I thought we learned a lot from it.

We were challenged quite a bit, and I wanted to do the same.

Mike’s statements show that he was more reliant on the reputation of the school than on perceptions of the play-based curriculum as an innovative and progressive kind of teaching children in preschool; therefore, the choice was made according to the prestige and the perceived benefit his son could receive from it.

Connie did not comment specifically on the curriculum at the Commercial Preschool and the impact it had on her choice of the preschool facility for her child. She noted only that she had done some research on the Internet and read the promotional materials provided at Commercial Preschool, which dictated her choice for her older son. Unless much had changed between the time her older son and her younger son attended, she saw no real reason to revisit specifics regarding the curriculum. She reported
favoring play but did not provide any clear idea she had about play as an instrument of learning. She associated it with socialization.

Patty was not completely in favor of the play-based practices in place at Commercial Preschool at the time of this writing. She stated that children need more structure and that she would have liked to see children take small periods of time to sit and work on skills. Patty assumed that the curriculum at Commercial Preschool would include structure that would “mimic real school.” Her viewpoint stands at odds with the philosophy held by the administration and staff of the preschool in which she enrolled her child.

**Children’s Right to Play**

Play is not optional but rather fundamental in a child’s development. The United Nations recognized this and as a result formed the international treaty that sets the universal standards for the rights of children. It serves as a benchmark for which a nation’s treatment of its children can be measured.


1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

2. States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.
The views of Donna and Connie on a play concept in learning coincided: They both agreed that children may acquire particular knowledge and skills through games. Donna’s and Connie’s reflections on children’s right to play presented below parallel the views of Mike, Jennifer, and Laura on the same issue; however, Patty’s answers suggest that she hardly welcomed play in the context of her children’s education.

Overall, parents perceived a play-based early childhood curriculum in different ways. Some of the interviewed parents welcomed playing and having fun as an avenue for learning, but others thought that school should be a serious institution with limited play time. For example, Donna’s answers suggest that she respected the right of children to behave accordingly to their age even within a school environment. Hence, she liked the way in which learning was organized for her son; she stated that his school had an attractive playground and its classrooms resembled playrooms instead of educational settings. Donna thought that it was natural for people to enjoy playing. She said:

I want to play, and I do when I have time, but it’s not going to be an expectation because I have my adult responsibilities, my mom responsibilities, my professional responsibilities, and although I’d love to play all day, I can’t do that. That’s not realistic.

She wanted to cultivate the same philosophy based on the concept of reasonable and appropriate play in her children. According to her, play time should be balanced because besides fun, play produces an unrealistic belief that life is easy, happy, and lucky.

Connie agreed that play is an important element of learning, and she added that different types of games are equally important. For her, involvement in structured games
like board games, basketball, and card games, taught children to follow the rules and
achieve specific objectives. When they engaged in unstructured play like running around
the playground, playing with blocks, and drawing, they learned to express their
imagination, creativity, and personality. Connie welcomed the idea of play as a learning
instrument. She agreed that children best learned through play:

Because they learn more by it, they don’t really know that they’re learning, but
they are. So it’s still fun for them and then they get engaged in it and then you’ll
see them do it later. It just kind of snowballs from there.

Connie thought that teachers needed to respect children’s right to play; however, for her,
play was a properly organized and sense-bearing activity, not purposeless acts.

Patty regarded play in the field of learning with skepticism and distrust. She
believed the play-based curriculum was totally new, and she needed time to think about it
in the context of her children’s education. Patty did not think that learning through play
was appropriate for all children. For her, play was necessary for active, highly energetic
children who tended to move and jump all the time. Evaluating the appropriateness of
play in the cases of her daughter and son, she said, “The energy in her is just, you know,
unbelievable; in my older one, it’s not so much.” Patty perceived play simply as an
activity allowing the release of excessive energy divorced from the learning process. She
did not treat play as a child’s right. Instead Patty recognized that play, especially open-
air games, was inevitable in childhood and provided an opportunity to occupy free time.
The views of all the parents with the exception of Patty reflected the approval of introducing play into their children’s learning program. According to Moyles (2012), “Every child has the right to play” (p. 148); she suggested that as with other education-related ideas offered by progressive educators, play within a learning paradigm has its supporters and opponents. In contrast to other interviewed parents, Patty presented a more conservative view of learning and education systems in general. If she recognized her children’s right to play, she would agree that a child’s ability to release energy and creativity through play is natural and learning though play may be the best alternative to conventional primary school education.

**What Counts as Measure of Knowledge**

Mike, Patty, and Jennifer revealed their fears about their children’s achievement in their interviews. According to the data, this was less a concern to Connie, Laura, and Donna than the others. Overall, the answers on this topic touched upon the issues of good academic performance and the importance of real-life achievements beyond school. The data show these parents’ fears about either their children’s education or their future success.

Mike, a single parent, recognized the importance of remembering that the tests children take at schools cannot accurately portray the full potential of their knowledge and skills. He was certain that test scores did not indicate a person’s opportunity for success in life. He stated:

I’ve never been a test taker. I’m just—I’m not. When I went to take the graduation test, I didn’t do well. I’m just not good at it, but it’s not to say that I’m
not an intelligent person. But if nobody would have taken that chance and based only on that test score, where would I have been?

Mike’s comments indicate evidence of his belief that tests cannot demonstrate a child’s real-life achievement; for him, test scores may indicate temporary academic success, but they do not reflect personal success in life. Mike believed that through tests, children may learn how to take a test properly; but taking a test is a less important skill than, for example, “how you solve problems, how you talk to people, how you communicate.” Mike’s idea of success was overall lifetime achievement, not necessarily associated with academic performance or high test scores but with well-developed social skills, individual potential, and natural talent.

Jennifer was, however, preoccupied with academic achievements for her daughter. She wanted her child to do her best and to work hard in order to achieve success in her adult life. For example, she believed that it was better to promote success in the areas where the child excelled instead of to push her to have average grades in the subjects where she was weaker. Jennifer added, “So we work with what we have, and I’ll encourage her to do something that she’s successful at. You know, maybe it’s not math and science. Maybe it’ll be creative or artistic or whatever.” Jennifer made efforts to provide a strong academic foundation for her daughter. She said she would accept the direction her daughter chose, that is, art and music; however, she must complete with conviction and academic success whatever she chose. Patty also thought that good performance at school predicted success in the future. Having high expectations regarding her children’s performance, she stated the following:
[I want my children to] strive for every point possible. Cs are not acceptable, and obviously anything less than that is you’re in a kind of big trouble. Um, I do watch their grades with the current school system that Morgan’s in; I watch her grades every single day.

Patty equated good grades and discipline with determination and success. She was certain that high grades at school provided a person with an opportunity to achieve better outcomes in other aspects of life. Thus, she paid thorough attention to her children’s academic progress. Although Patty understood that the current educational system was not perfect, she believed that success in school might guarantee success in life.

The participants’ answers reflected two types of fears related to the absence of the child’s achievements. The first type is associated with a parent who thinks that a child’s real-life achievements (especially in nonacademic spheres) do not necessarily depend on academic progress and who fears that too much attention is given to test scores. Another type of parental fear is the belief that academic progress is paramount for individual achievements in life; if the child demonstrates poor performance at school and does not work hard to achieve academic progress, the likelihood of attending a reputable college or university and landing a successful career is slim.

Parents’ fears about children’s achievements are natural. Each parent has a personal experience that helps him or her to identify what path their child should choose in order to succeed in life. In this context, Jongsma, Peterson, McInnis, and Berghuis (2004) have identified four types of parents: those who (a) express frustration with their
children’s level of development and academic progress, (b) hold unrealistic expectations of what exactly determines real-life achievements for their children, (c) express disappointment about the current level of their children’s development and progress, and (d) have worked to adjust their expectations of their children to realistic levels. The results of the interviews with participants in the current study indicate that five of the six fall into the fourth category. Patty’s responses indicate she has beliefs similar to those in the first two categories.

Jennifer, who appreciated various learning pedagogies but still believed her daughter required exposure to test-taking skills in order to be successful, was a good example of one who truly valued the importance of early learning experiences and can appreciate new methods. Because her only basis of comparison comprised her own experiences in school, including standards and standardized tests, she believed that including these practices was important. Jennifer did well on such tests, but how her child would do and whether results would influence her beliefs and attitudes remain to be seen.

In general, parents tend to fear what they cannot control. They are afraid that their children will not have an easy go of it. Many contemporary parents struggle, and they want a different kind of future for their kids (Donahue, 2007). Parental anxiety is a rational reaction to a frightening economic climate. Predictably, parents are concerned about their children and how they will fare in an increasingly competitive world (Donahue, 2007). Parents think they must do all for their children: stimulate them, keep them constantly entertained, do everything for them so they won’t have to endure any
frustration (Donahue, 2007). They worry that if they fail to do so, their children will somehow fall behind. Donahue (2007) offered the counterargument that constant hovering causes children difficulty in developing the independence, resourcefulness, imagination, and basic life skills that will help them achieve in school and in life. Parents’ fears contribute to their beliefs and attitudes, which drive their decisions.

Image of the Child

During various historical periods and cultures children have been viewed as a source of labor, as wide-eyed innocents, as creatures to manage or control, and as beings that need to be trained properly to become the “right” kind of adults (Atkins, 2007). According to Ariès (1962) conceptions of childhood have varied across the centuries. The very notion of a child is both historically and culturally conditioned, but exactly how the conception of childhood has changed historically and how conceptions differ across cultures is a matter of scholarly controversy and philosophical interest (Kennedy, 2006). Ariès argued, partly on the evidence of depictions of infants in medieval art (including images of Jesus) that the medievals saw children as simply “little adults.”

Although children had been active in the work force throughout most of human history, child labor reached a new height during the Industrial Revolution. Children worked grueling hours in dangerous conditions. Small, agile, and able to fit into many factory spaces and mines that most adults could not, they were useful in many fields. They were easy to manage and control and could be paid low wages. This changed during the Great Depression when adult Americans needed all available paying jobs, leading to child labor laws and restrictions. In order to draw meaningful conclusions, I
needed to explore the images of the child held by participants. They shared similar influencing factors that affected their image of the child; for example, environment and relationships.

Mike, Jennifer, and Donna favored the idea that their children should act like adults during appropriate occasions. These parents believed that adult behaviors in childhood are beneficial; at the same time, some thought that children’s behavior should reflect their ages because sooner or later they would grow up.

Mike respected his son’s ability to act like an adult. He recalled that when he became a single parent, he realized how difficult it is to raise a child without a mother. In turn, his son observed what his father had to do to sustain him and provide him with an environment favoring normal development. Mike interacted with his son as if he were an adult, having too high expectations for him. At the same time, the father admitted, “I don’t want him to grow up too fast. I want him to see what other kids are doing. I want him to interact on that level.” Mike appreciated his son’s mature nature, but at the same time, he thought that a child should act like a child until he indeed became an adult.

Jennifer encouraged her daughter to act like an adult. She admitted that very often her child refused to listen to adults (parents and teachers) and behaved irresponsibly. She said, “So the more she can learn to listen to adults and follow their directions in different situations, the better. I think it is important.” Thus, Jennifer wanted her child to follow the teachers’ and parents’ examples and behave accordingly, in other words, responsibly.
Donna expressed her belief as follows: “You’re a child and we’re an adult, and you don’t get the same privileges that we do.”

This notion of the little adult resonated with some participants, and it appeared to stem back to the fear of being successful in school and being successful in life. Acting like an adult, which by the participants’ definition is to be mature and responsible, provides one with greater opportunities in school and in life. Mike, Jennifer, and Donna welcomed some mature features of character in their children, but they also thought that children should mostly behave in a way that corresponds to their age (their selves and inner natures).

There are many different images of the child. All of us have experienced childhood. These experiences, together with cultural artefacts (such as books, movies, rituals, institutions) inform our understanding of the young child. Each one of us holds an image of the child within ourselves that directs how we relate to a child. This belief within us pushes us to behave in certain ways; it orients us on how we talk to the child, listen to the child, observe the child (Malaguzzi 1994). Beliefs we hold about children, and the images of the child on which we draw, affect our decisions. It was important for this study to seek to understand these six parents’ images of the child as they direct interactions with their child as well as influence the choices they make for their child.

**Dewey’s, Vygotsky’s, and the Participants’ Views on What Influences the Child**

The child’s own instincts and powers furnish the material and provide the starting point for all education. The child, not the subject matter, determines both quantity and quality of learning (Dewey, 1938). By recognizing the value of experiential and
continuous learning, the ideas of Mike, Laura, and Connie aligned with those of Dewey with regard to factors (mainly experience, continuity, and interaction) influencing a child. Donna’s and Jennifer’s views coincided with Vygotsky’s main postulates about children’s development through play and social interactions. Patty’s strict and rigid academic desires for her daughter fit into neither.

Mike’s answers to interview questions showed that he believed that early experiences and social interactions help in adult life. At the same time, Mike stated that according to his own experience, both a preschool environment and the family provide a person with essential knowledge and skills. He argued that a preschool prepares a child for daily social interactions, but the family, which in his experience comprised only his mother, a housewife, provides necessary educational preparation through reading literature and viewing educational television programs. He said, “I think my mother taught me more of what I need to learn, but the environment taught me more how to interact with people, how to play, how to share, just the basics of being in preschool.” In other words, Mike’s ideas aligned with Dewey’s points about learning through experience and early interactions, primarily social.

Laura, a former early childhood educator and Dewey advocate, stated that learning through experiences is a nonprescribed curriculum that mimics life.

Connie thought that whichever activities her child would choose, they would help him to gain positive and negative experiences. Commenting upon her son’s current experience, she stated that playing is the activity that “makes him feel more relaxed, too; then he’s more receptive to, you know, do it again or repeat it or try it somewhere else in
life.” In other words Connie thought that through play her son felt comfortable, and this feeling allowed him to try again even if he could not do a particular activity initially. She also believed that when her son became an adult, this experience would help him to overcome challenges. Connie’s ideas echoed Dewey’s reflections on a human being’s continuous development as an individual and the value of continuous learning in life.

Donna’s views align with Vygotsky’s primary postulates about children’s development through games and social interactions. Their views on a child’s personality indicated that they aligned with Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory. According to Donna, her own early years provided positive impressions about learning. Her kindergarten classroom was organized in a way that favored both playing and learning. She wanted her son to experience the same positive feelings during the lessons by playing and interacting with others in a classroom; however, she mostly supported structured as opposed to unstructured games. She said:

I know that if it’s a true curriculum, there’s going to be structure to it anyways. Um, I’d probably have to learn more about what the learning is because I’m not a traditional learner either. I learn through hands-on. I’ve always been told I’m a visual problem solver. I need to do it to learn it. I can’t read it. I can’t have somebody tell it to me. I need to do it.

Donna believed that a child needs to play in order to understand how theory may function in practice. In other words, she agreed with Vygotsky that play accompanied by social interaction leads to knowledge acquisition, essential experience, and even comprehension.
Jennifer recognized the essential role of social interactions in a child’s development, connecting her to Vygotsky’s beliefs. Recalling with pleasure her preschool years spent in kindergarten, she said, “I loved my teacher. I just loved her.” Jennifer’s love for her kindergarten teacher and interactions provided her with a positive experience. In turn, this experience helped her develop her cognitive abilities and influenced her own personality.

Mike, Connie, Donna, and Jennifer regarded their children’s development in ways that resembled Dewey’s and Vygotsky’s perspectives. These parents would probably agree with theorists that “play no longer appears trivial but is seen as crucial for children’s development and learning” (Vries, 2001, p. 76). In other words, they thought that personal experience, play, and social interaction are paramount for learning and constructing one’s own perception of the world.

The participants acknowledged the social influence in their children’s lives. They agreed that their system of values, career choice, and self-perception were essential to their academic success as well as heavily influenced by society. The interviewed parents recognized that children tend to be influenced by both society and culture.

For example, Donna wanted to influence her child and she did so, but at the same time she understood that a child cannot be influenced by family alone. She stated, “I listened to my mother very much; I look toward her as a mentor.” In addition, Donna indicated that even in her adult life, she did the same things her mother had done. She recognized that parents have considerable impact on their children.
Connie thought that the teacher’s influence also occupies an essential place in child development. According to her, a respected teacher may have the same positive impact on children as parents do. Overall, Connie recognized that in childhood individuals are affected by teachers’ influence, but a teacher may have both positive and negative impact on a child.

Patty held that an academic program influences an individual’s life most strongly in the long term. She recalled her own experience, stating that curriculum may shape a student’s world view, the perception of the culture to which he or she belongs, and even moral values. Patty recognized that a curriculum structure had a considerable impact on her. She said, “I thought there was the structure of the curriculum. Like we do this, this, and this. Um, I guess I didn’t really look at it from an academic standpoint.”

Children may not be aware of the educational value of a school curriculum; at the same time, they are influenced by the academic content and underlying philosophy of a learning program. In other words, for Patty, learning at educational facilities, children unconsciously follow and fit the culture created by the subjects that surround them. Patty thought that the culture cultivated within schools exerts the main impact on children; Donna and Connie believed that the social factor is foundational in influence on a child’s life. According to Hollins (2008), each child tends to be influenced by the society and culture to which he or she belongs; he added that social and cultural interactions can be noticed within and beyond children’s school life. Donna, Connie, and Patty observed both social and cultural influences upon children; for them the social impact (embodied in parents, teachers, peers) and the cultural impact (expressed through an educational
curriculum, environment, school subjects) are tightly connected to each other. Because success in school is valued by society and is viewed as a primary determinant of adult mediation (Taylor, Clayton, & Rowley, 2004), understanding the parent’s view of what influences a child is important. Drawing on what they feel influences a child impacts their beliefs and attitudes and reflects their decision making process.

**Discussion**

The results of this research indicate that participants had their own vision of their child’s early learning experience, but all respondents (except for Laura, a professional educator) had scant knowledge of the fundamentals of early education. They were guided either by their own past experiences with schooling or by their subjective perceptions of how the educational process should take place (Glesne, 1999). Three major themes emerged during data analysis. These six participants considered socialization, structure, and reputation the driving force behind their decision to place their children at Commercial Preschool. These themes led to a deeper analysis, revealing the final layer: Preparation must be a prominent goal. The current findings indicate a serious gap between parents’ understanding of the preschool educational curriculum in which their children were involved on one hand and their early education goals for their children on the other.

All six participants indicated socialization as a reason to attend preschool. Some placed more emphasis on this than others as in the case of Mike and Jennifer, each of whom had only one child. That their children spent time around other children to learn how to get along with others and share was essential. To Connie, Laura, and Donna
learning to get along with children their own age was important because their sons were the youngest in their families. Patty felt that socialization is an important factor but not so important as structure and readiness.

Analysis of the current findings indicates that the majority of parents were heavily influenced by their past experiences in education, which motivated them either to choose the same path for their children (if they had enjoyed their education) or choose a completely different path for them (if they had not enjoyed it). Parents who enjoyed their school and preschool experiences were more eager to take their children to such facilities, but those who did not like their early childhood education experiences did so for other reasons, for example, child care.

A discrepancy existed between the participants’ personal experience with education and their visions for their own children. As a result, they were conflicted about whether to let their children develop at the pace and in a way they liked most or to see that they were prepared in a more structured and disciplined environment in hopes of readying them “for real school.” Even though only four participants had had a glimpse of what follows in the lives of preschoolers, all six mentioned structure as an important aspect of early childhood education. Those four parents who had older children and had already experienced the process wanted their children to be adequately prepared. To them, being prepared meant conforming to structured practices. The two parents who had their first or only child at Commercial Preschool recalled their time in school as sitting in desks, being quiet, listening to teachers, and doing large amounts of homework. A play-based curriculum as best practice for young learners may sound appealing to
parents; however, the fear of being unprepared for the next level plagues them and strongly influences their choices for their children.

Finally, parents’ beliefs emerged concerning the potential of early childhood education as a source of learning. Reputation of the school was a recurring theme; however, reputation seemed to represent success with reference to academic readiness, pointing back to the overarching theme of preparing children to be successful in elementary school and beyond.

The interview results indicate that parents’ fears related to children’s achievement, quality of life, future career, and social acceptance are inevitable and even natural. Being aware of their own mistakes in life, parents want their children to avoid negative experiences. Parents’ desires to make their children’s lives better can be detected in these fears. Adults know that facing failure is challenging and painful, so they tend to protect their children from life’s adversaries as much as they can. In this context, parents encourage their children to succeed in learning and to develop their cognitive skills as well as their social skills wherever possible (e.g., in a kindergarten, at home, in a playground).

The participants also tended toward preoccupation with their children’s development. They made corresponding efforts to shape their children; for example, they carefully chose their children’s social surroundings, wanting them to be influenced only by appropriate people, including authoritative family members, experienced teachers, and positive peers. Their views aligning with Dewey’s and Vygotsky’s views on child development, parents tried to place their children in settings where learning was favored
and diverse experiences, involvement in play, and active interaction with others were available. The participants also encouraged their children to imitate the appropriate behaviors and attitudes of adults; moreover, almost all parents expressed their respect for children’s right to play but remained skeptical about the extent to which it should drive the curriculum.

The adults’ answers pointed to their special attention to their children’s communication. They preferred to treat their children’s use of technology as an opportunity to enhance, not replace, live conversations. Believing that close relationships created in childhood tend to be lifelong, parents wanted their children to establish friendships with their own family members and preschool peers. In addition, the participants agreed that success in early years is essential and positively influences a child’s future successes in both personal and professional life.

External influences on parents’ beliefs about early education included reputation, curriculum, school location, popularity of the school in the community, and the type of teacher–student interaction. Knowledge of the play-based curriculum in place at Commercial Preschool at the time of this writing, however, was very low among the respondents.

As indicated in this research, the six participants had a strong desire to prepare their children for academic success, socialization, and the future. This desire indicates the need for additional research in the direction of child advocacy. Have events in contemporary society caused people to fixate on outcomes to the extent that children are overprepared? Have pressures to prepare children for success prevented them from
“being kids” and developing accordingly? Should children be involved in the process of making decisions about their early education? Talking to them would be a helpful means to understanding the interests, weakness, and strengths of the child. Is children’s participation in decisions about their education a new cultural trend?
CHAPTER VI
FINDINGS GLEANED FROM CONFLICTING BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

The purposes of this chapter were to (a) present the study findings in the context of the review of literature presented in Chapter 2, (b) establish the potential of the findings for future research, (c) share implications, (d) show the innovative nature of the research introduced in this study with regard to parents’ attitudes and beliefs about learning through play, and (e) identify areas of theory and practice in which the research findings can be implemented. Findings include the following:

1. Socialization, structure, and reputation: The driving forces behind the decisions of the six participants to place their children at Commercial Preschool;

2. Nature of knowledge: What parents say does and does not count as learning, what they want their children to know, and what influenced their pronouncements;

3. Fear: Parents feared their children would not be prepared for “real school,” college, career, and life;

4. Drawing on memories: Parents’ memories and stories about kindergarten and Grade 1;

5. High academic standards equated with high quality, success;

6. Balancing technology: Connecting to technology without sacrificing personal communication skills;
7. Misunderstanding of the word *play*: Play as recreation or means to learning; and

8. Parents equate structure to academics.

The first section covers the literature and parents’ corresponding beliefs about childhood learning, the nature of contemporary preschool education, and parents’ beliefs and attitudes about play-based education. The second section sheds light on the research findings about preschool education and demonstrates the value of the results of the study for parents and teacher educators. The final section includes recommendations for future research. Overall, this chapter underscores the importance of the current study for early childhood education. The six participants gave complex answers that show deep thinking and sometimes inconsistencies in their beliefs, illustrating how difficult and emotional the business of child rearing can be. In the areas that seem contradictory, the parents continued to learn and grow and think about their children and their futures. The process of interviewing helped me clarify the answers to important questions throughout the research process; thus, I regarded participants’ inconsistencies as human and evolving.

**Discussion of Results Vis-à-Vis the Literature**

This section contains a discussion of the interview results with regard to the literature. The participants’ informal responses were compared with research-based data on childhood learning, existing school curricula, and parents’ attitudes about learning through play. This section was designed (a) to determine whether the study outcomes coincided with or diverged from theory on a play-based curriculum in early childhood
education and (b) to reveal which new information (based on real-life experiences) can be added to the existing literature on the topic at hand.

**Early Childhood Learning**

The interviews showed participants’ lack of extensive information about early childhood learning; however, in the majority of the cases, responses echoed the ideas presented in the research-based literature on individual early development and articulated in Dewey’s (1938), Erikson’s (1950), Piaget’s (1936), and Vygotsky’s (1933, 1962, 1978, 1997) works. All six parents in the study agreed that early childhood learning is paramount for individual intellectual development and future success as held by Blenkin and Kelly (1996) and Goodlad (1984). In addition, their belief that childhood years are important for multifaceted individual development resembled the philosophy underlying constructivist theories as outlined by Berger and Luckmann (1966) and Rosenholtz (1989) and discussed in the literature review. The views of the participants aligned with the constructivist idea that the development of diverse skills, primarily intellectual and social, during the early years is essential for the individual construction of a child’s perceptions of the world, which influence both present and future thought and behavior.

According to the interview results, these parents treated early childhood learning like the key theorists on early child development, including Dewey, Vygotsky, Erickson, and Piaget. The clear parallels between Dewey’s (1938) experiential learning theory and parents’ positions can be identified. For example, Mike and Connie recognized the significance of diverse experiences gained in childhood; they noticed that past experiences relate to future ones. These parents’ views aligned with the theorists’ ideas
about engagement in experience as a life-long process and individuals’ continuous development throughout their lives by uniting old and new experiences.

The beliefs of the interviewed parents also coincided with Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory. Five parents’ answers in particular reflected their support of play as the best opportunity to involve children in necessary social interactions and a vital source for learning and individual development in general. For example, according to Donna, Laura, and Jennifer playing games and engagement in interactive activities positively influence children at the cognitive and intellectual levels. Their statements echoed Vygotsky’s (1933, 1962, 1978, 1997) works, suggesting that socially interactive play is an integrative component of the evolution of child learning, leading to the formation of essential skills and knowledge.

Two parents mirrored Erikson’s (1950) psychological development theory in their answers: Mike and Patty demonstrated a belief that early cognitive development is indispensable for inculcating in children self-regulatory, self-conscious, and independent behavior. Overall, the parents’ beliefs resembled Erikson’s (1950) idea about the strong relationship between children’s cognitive development and the formation of ego identity associated with a conscious sense of self.

By recognizing the positive influence of learning on a child’s cognitive potential, the majority of parents, specifically Connie, Jennifer, Laura, and Patty, aligned with Piaget (1936) and his cognitive developmental theory. Their answers reflected his idea about the natural processes of mental associations, memorization, and language and literacy formation occurring in the process of child learning activities (Piaget, 1936). In
addition, these parents’ statements about the power of learning to increase the rate of a child’s cognitive development echoed the theorist’s key arguments.

In addition, some discrepancies arose between related theoretical literature and the participants’ responses. These occurred in the majority of issues, including the correlation among educational establishments and children’s intellectual development and Dewey’s, Vygotsky’s, Erikson’s, and Piaget’s theories. For example, Laura recognized the significance of preschool education for a child’s intellectual development; however, she believed that the successes and failures her children experienced in their preschool education may not reflect their actual intelligence levels. Donna stated that a child’s intellectual level as indicated by a test cannot fully reflect an individual’s real-life potential; for example, one of her stepchildren was considered a gifted student by teachers, but the other stepchild was said to have the potential to become a good learner, which, in turn, may be a sign of intelligence as well. These two parents’ positions conflicted with statements by Blenkin and Kelly (1996) and Goodlad (1984) about the decisive role of educational establishments in the development of children’s intellect. The educational establishment plays a decisive role in a child’s development, but the participants noted that many other factors determine a child’s intellectual development.

The positions of some parents were at odds with experiential theories. For example, the position Patty took did not align with Dewey’s (1938) theory. In answers to interview questions she indicated that gaining personal experience is sometimes less important than learning from others’ experience. In contrast with Dewey, Patty argued that knowledge of others’ experiences, particularly those of parents, may prevent her
child from making mistakes and having negative experiences as she did; however, the parents’ ideas about the value of experience in early childhood development for the most part resembled accepted experiential learning theory.

Parents’ responses indicate a certain distance from Vygotsky’s (1933, 1962, 1978, 1997) theory. For example, the positions of Connie, Donna, Patty and Mike did not align with the theorist’s idea that only interpersonal interaction may provide an opportunity for individual construction of meaning. For these parents, writing and reading activities also play an essential role in child cognitive processes perhaps because they had acquired knowledge in a traditional way by reading and writing instead of through communication or play.

In addition, on the basis of the interviews, I determined that the parents’ ideas resembled broader versions of Erikson’s (1950) theory. For example, Mike agreed that both positive and negative experiences gained in the past are necessary for growth into adulthood. At the same time, he added that adults mostly use memorable instead of negative experiences from their childhood when referring to decisions pertaining to their children as a way of protecting them from a similar negative experiences. Laura recognized that gaining experience is a continuous process. She added that in childhood the majority of experiences occur automatically and everything is a new experience, whereas in adulthood gaining experience is mostly a process of which one is aware. The ideas of these parents complemented the theorist’s views by providing the ideas that people learn best not only from their past experiences but also from the memorable ones and that personal experience is a matter of both conscious and unconscious processes.
In their responses some parents alluded to ideas similar to those of Piaget (1936) and complemented them with additional information. For example, Patty implied that cognitive development may not necessarily be a purely natural process occurring at an unconscious level. She felt that individual awareness, including self-discipline, especially through a structured learning process, fosters a child’s successful acquisition of new knowledge and cognitive skills. Jennifer added that the best example of cognitive development as a simulated process is taking tests. According to her, test taking enhances memorization and mental association processes, which the theorist mentioned in the context of his nativist model.

On the basis of the information stated above, I determined that parents’ responses aligned with the key concepts and ideas offered by researchers and theorists. The majority of answers provided by Mike, Jennifer, Patty, Connie, Laura, and Donna show that this study fits the research-based context of the literature. At the same time, some parents’ statements contributed new information to the existing research base.

**Nature of Contemporary Preschool Education**

In some respects, including the focus of preschool education, the developmental unsuitability of contemporary schooling for children, and the educational value of play, the interviewed parents’ answers generally coincided with the existing literature on current school curricula. Recognizing the value of early childhood education for their children, parents repeated the ideas articulated in Blenkin and Kelly’s (1996) and Hurst’s (1997) works. They agreed that early education not only favors intellectual development but also creates continuous learning experience and ensures the child’s interaction with
society and the cultural environment. They aligned with Saracho and Spodek (2003), who wrote about the potential of preschool educational establishments, particularly when Mike, Connie, Laura, and Jennifer placed special emphasis on communication and socialization in general; but Patty and Donna underscored the necessity of academic preparation for school. All interviewed parents perceived the significant role that kindergarten played in the lives of their children in terms of building a foundation for their educational future and interaction with society.

Parents’ responses echoed the positions of the NAEYC and ideas of Bergen (2002), Bredekamp (1987), and Granucci (1990) concerning the characteristics of proper preschool curriculum. They welcomed the idea that an appropriate curriculum is one that promotes child well-being and is associated with well-planned, challenging, and comprehensive learning programs. For example, Mike, Patty, and Jennifer argued that preschool education should be structured; but Laura, Connie, and Donna, preferred a more open-ended combination of activities, including problem-solving activities and investigation.

The majority of parents agreed that contemporary preschool curriculum does not fit the cognitive and psychosocial developmental needs of children. The parents aligned with Boland (2010), Marcon (2002), Saluja et al. (2002), and Sisson (2011) with regard to the inability of contemporary profit-oriented preschool establishments to accommodate the needs associated with early childhood learning. For example, the responses of Laura, Jennifer, Connie, and Donna implied that they understood that their preschool-aged children lack the attention span required to apprehend bundles of abstract information.
Thus, the parents agreed that preschool curricula should not be purely driven by academics and should involve appropriate educational practices for successful early development.

With the exception of Patty, all participants agreed that academics-based preschool programs cannot meet the needs of their children; hence, their views partially resembled those of authors who supported a play-based curriculum (Alliance for Childhood, 2006; Blasi et al., 2002; Fisher et al., 2008; McMullen et al., 2004; Wood, 2004). They noted the development of their children’s cognitive and psychosocial perspectives through play. For Mike, Jennifer, Connie, Laura, and Donna, in the context of a preschool curriculum, play activities, structured or not, serve as sources of essential diverse experiences, knowledge—both academic and social—and appropriate behavioral models.

According to the six parents’ answers, appropriate preschool curricula did not serve the main criteria used for selecting a preschool for their children. They reflected the ideas of Kirk and Anicich (1996), Stipek and Seal (2001), and West (1993) about widespread parental lack of knowledge about developmentally appropriate learning programs. Connie, Laura, and Donna are the best examples of parents whose personal past experience, warm learning atmosphere, socialization, and reputation were more significant factors for choosing Commercial Preschool than was the presence of a specially structured curriculum fitting the developmental needs of their children.

All six of the parents recognized of the role of contemporary preschool education in facilitating academic preparedness as did Bennett et al. (1998) and MacNaughton and
Williams (2009). Like these researchers, the parents argued that the emphasis of preschool learning programs on academic success helps children to achieve future success. They all shared numerous plans for their children’s futures, including achieving success in a professional field, building excellent careers, and being smart. They aligned with the research-based positions on academic preparedness as the significance of preschool education.

Finally, four of the parents recognized that in comparison to games, structured activities traditionally implemented in today’s preschools are insufficient to satisfy their children’s needs. The parents’ responses echoed the ideas articulated in the works of Chang et al. (2006), Shonkoff and Phillips (2000), and Singer et al. (2006). Like these researchers Jennifer, Connie, Laura, and Donna recognized that teacher-directed and structured activities are ineffective from the perspective of academic success and the child’s sense of comfort. The parents agreed that activities lacking a play component and child initiative lead to the absence of interest, academic failure, lowered learning motivation, and insufficient self-confidence.

The participants’ positions differed from the research-based information, however, with regard to the nature of contemporary preschool education, specifically the significance of academic excellence, the indispensability of play in preschool learning, and existing concerns regarding a play-based curriculum. For example, Mike held that well-developed social and problem-solving skills are paramount for a child, but the academic excellence manifested in high test scores and general learning success are relevant only if a child is prepared for future professional career; in other words,
according to this father, academic excellence matters only in terms of becoming an intelligent person and learning how to cope with difficult tasks. Laura argued that in preschool education, children’s socialization is more important than academic excellence; furthermore, she asserted that for children of preschool age, academic excellence may teach them only to become good standardized test takers instead of socialized, cooperative, and communicative people. These parents’ statements contrasted with those of Ailwood (2003) and Nutbrown (2002) about the necessity of a child’s achievement of academic excellence in preschool in order to become successful in elementary school, college, or another educational establishment in the future.

Some participants did not support the research-based idea about the necessity of play in traditional preschool education. Unlike other parents, Patty and Donna denied that play is indispensable in child learning. Patty did not support the idea that play fosters the intellectual, cognitive, and psychosocial development of children; she argued that preschool education should provide children with knowledge about numbers and letters instead of allow engagement in entertaining but chaotic activities usually favored in play. For Donna, play cannot teach children to be reasonable, self-conscious, and responsible; she believed instead that acquisition of essential learning skills and knowledge through traditional instruction may foster their early development. These two parents’ views differed from those expressed by Duncan and Tarulli (2003), Elkind (2007), Fromberg (1998), and Grossman (2004), who asserted that play is not as simple as it may seem because it fosters multifaceted development in a child and teaches how to overcome challenges, make correct decisions, and interact with others.
According to the existing literature on contemporary preschool education, parents are usually skeptical about play-based learning. Gardner (2000), Guha (1987), Stephens (2009), Sutton-Smith (1997), and Vinovskis (1993) stated that parents tend to be traditional in educational issues when choosing the best preschool for their children. In addition, they found that parents perceive play as less important in learning than knowledge and skills acquired in a structured classroom; however, the ideas of the majority of parents in this study deviated from what these researchers found. Mike, Jennifer, Connie, and Laura welcomed the idea of play-based learning. According to them, if play is organized and structured properly, it may help children apprehend the preschool learning program easily. Thus, these parents were hardly skeptical about play-based curriculum, and their views differed from those in the studies noted above.

Overall, the interviewed parents’ beliefs generally aligned with the conclusions of the researchers, so the study findings basically coincide with the results of the studies on the nature of contemporary preschool education. In some respects, however, the participants in this study maintained positions regarding academic excellence and the role of play in education that differed from the conclusions presented in reputable scientific sources; therefore, this study both supports the existing research base on contemporary preschool learning and adds new information regarding an appropriate preschool curriculum.

Parents’ Beliefs and Attitudes About a Play-Based Curriculum

The parents’ answers about their beliefs and attitudes concerning play in an educational context reflected the positions held by researchers (e.g., Harkness & Super,
1997) who studied parents’ belief systems that may differ but are equally significant for child learning outcomes. In addition, all participants’ positions resembled that of Mills (2009): Parents’ belief in their children’s success supports children in their preschool development through whichever means, structured or play-based, is provided. The parents’ positions on the role of their own attitudes in children’s lives coincided with the researchers’ argument about the potential of parents’ beliefs to influence child development directly.

Although the interviewed parents presented different belief systems regarding play-based education, the majority of their answers echoed the researcher’s views on the common beliefs shared by all caring mothers and fathers. Specifically, Mike, Connie, Laura, and Donna stated their primary belief that everyday interactions with their children positively influence their early development; through these interactions, their children acquire their first cognitive and social skills necessary for successful development. The parents’ statements reflected the ideas of Hirsh-Pasek et al. (2008) and Parker et al. (1999). The coincidence of the researchers and parents on the necessity of day-to-day parent–child interactions implies that a loving and caring family presents the first foundation for child learning.

According to the literature review in Chapter 2, approval of play-based preschool education by parents depends on their own life experiences during their childhoods or in their professions Sigel and McGillicuddy-De Lisi (2002). According to Blevins-Knabe and Musun-Miller (1996) and Sigel and McGillicuddy-De Lisi (2002), if parents had neutral or negative experiences with play in childhood, they are likely to deny the
efficacy of play-based education for their children; if they had positive experiences with play, they are likely to support learning through play. For example, Laura had professional teaching experience and believed that play, both structured and unstructured, fosters the learning process and positively influences child cognition and psychosocial development. Laura’s positive professional experience using play in a learning context motivated her support of a play-based curriculum in her son’s educational life. By contrast, Patty’s childhood experience caused her to treat play as entertainment instead of as a means to acquire knowledge or skills. For this reason, she did not want her children to follow the play-based curriculum at their preschools. The parents’ views aligned with the researchers’ findings that parents’ personal experiences influence approval or disapproval of play-based learning in their children’s preschool education.

On the basis of some parents’ responses, not all parents recognized the true benefit of play. In fact, Draper and Duffy (2010) believed that contemporary parents need a better understanding of the educational potential of play. Donna’s and Patty’s answers suggested that their knowledge about play in a learning context was minimal. According to Donna, learning through play is beneficial because it relaxes children, releasing their pent-up energy; Patty argued that children’s play during lessons is irrelevant in academics. In other words, some parents’ answers confirmed the widely held scientific finding about parents’ misunderstanding of play in education.

The interview results demonstrated that if parents understand and appreciate play, they encourage their own children to be engaged in play activities during their early development as much as they can. The idea underlying some parents’ responses echoed
Qadiri and Manhas (2009), who believed that although some parents may still be skeptical about play-based education, the majority of them indeed agree that a play-based approach is the method that best fosters early childhood education. All participants with the exception of Patty suggested that play activities are vital elements in the early development of the child. For Mike and Laura, play provides an excellent opportunity for easy child socialization; furthermore, these parents noted that playing with peers and teachers helps children learn from other people’s experiences. For Jennifer, Connie, and Donna, a play atmosphere not only makes children more intelligent but also teaches them to respect their peers and to get along with others in order to achieve their learning goals.

All parents’ beliefs about the role of mathematics and sciences in their children’s lives coincided with the information stated in the corresponding literature on the same issue. According to Blevins-Knabe and Musun-Miller (1996), if parents have a positive attitude toward mathematics, they are likely to involve their children in related activities and to support their corresponding career choices. Because Laura and Donna had positive mathematics-related experiences, they motivated their children to engage in mathematics activities. Mike, Jennifer, Patty, and Connie thought that the sciences and mathematics in particular are essential in academic learning; however, they saw that their children had talents and success in other fields as well, so they did not insist on their increased attention to these subjects. Their views demonstrate that although they treated play as a useful activity, mathematics, the sciences, and skill and drill activities are still of paramount importance for their children’s intelligence and professional future. At the
same time, the majority of participants understood that even though their children might not have been inclined toward these subjects, they should have solid math and science skills in order to compete.

At the same time, these parents did not align themselves with views stated in the literature on other points regarding parents’ beliefs and their attitudes about play-based education, specifically the indispensability of competition in preschool education, parents’ anxiety about standards, distrust of play-oriented learning, and play-based curriculum as the most effective practices in early childhood development. According to Maddaus (1990) and Singer et al. (2006), parents tend to promote a sense of competition in their children because a competitive spirit usually leads to academic excellence and positive outcomes; however, Patty, Laura, Donna, and Connie believed that although their children may express themselves as competitors, a competitive spirit is not as significant as well-developed social skills or intellect. Even Mike and Jennifer, who treated competitiveness as a helpful personality trait, thought that competition alone is insufficient to achieve success in life. Participants disagreed with the idea that early education should promote competition, especially at the expense of other features, such as responsibility, integrity, and self-confidence.

Another point appearing in the literature with which the parents were in agreement involves increased parents’ anxiety about standardization of schooling and the resultant distrust of play-based education. Morrow and Rand (1991) and Saracho (2002) argued that parents are traditionally anxious about standards and preoccupied with whether or not their children meet the norms prescribed by the contemporary educational
system. For this reason, parents were skeptical of a play-based curriculum as a serious learning medium promoting their children’s acquisition of necessary knowledge and skills. All parents with the exception of Laura, however, argued that the presence of standards in school testing and learning programs did not put their children’s quality of education and their futures in jeopardy. Laura had early childhood teaching experience, so she understood first-hand the weaknesses of the educational system from the inside and supported the idea of play-based education. Other parents relied on their own beliefs, life experiences, and intuition, suggesting that standards should not be associated with negative influence on children’s success and potential; hence, their attitudes about a play-based curriculum were either neutral or positive.

The research presented in the literature review has provided significant support for the play-based curriculum as the most effective practice in early child development. According to Corter and Pelletier (1995) the Canadian experience with play-based education focused on child-centered learning suggests that it is the only successful instrument that can be implemented in preschool education. Nevertheless, Mike, Jennifer, Connie, Donna, and Laura believed that although play is beneficial for the cognitive and psychosocial development of their children, it should be combined with traditional academics-focused programs. These parents approved of a curriculum involving learning through play, but they argued that a play-based curriculum should be mixed with an academics-based one in order to prepare them for “school.” Patty believed that preschool should mimic real school, and play should be left for recreation.
The beliefs of interviewed parents regarding the importance of early child development reflected researchers’ views on this topic. At the same time, their statements regarding competition, standardization, and play-based curriculum also reflected unique positions based on their own experiences and life situations. The study findings suggest that on one hand, parents supported play-based education; on the other hand, they believed that play activities are successful in providing their children with appropriate knowledge and skills but not those skills required for future success in school. The interviewed parents believed that learning through play should be accompanied by academics-focused activities in order to provide a comprehensive early learning experience, one that provides the most effective way for children to learn through play with the reality of traditional setting looming in the near future.

**Insights Shedding Light on Study Results**

The following section provides implications of the research findings for those involved in preschool education, specifically parents and teacher educators. Implications demonstrate the practical aspect of the study results and their usefulness in the real-life context of early childhood development.

**Insights for Parents**

The degree to which the arguments of the six participants regarding the various interview topics related to early childhood development, learning through play, parents’ fears, and the child’s personality can shed light on current beliefs is limited because their knowledge of preschool education was similarly limited. Because the parents’ statements were based on their own life experiences, they are perhaps worth the attention of other
parents interested in the successful intellectual, cognitive, and psychosocial development of their children. The interviewed parents’ responses seem to provide extensive practical implications relative to the concerns of all parents.

Parent considerations about the purpose of preschool education indicate that all participants were interested in the early development of their children and therefore enrolled them in a preschool setting. All six parents stated that preschool education is extremely beneficial for different reasons. First, a child has an opportunity to ensure his or her educational potential, which may determine future academic progress in elementary school, high school, and postsecondary education. Second, a preschool education helps to develop children’s personalities as well as their intellectual, cognitive, and social skills. Third, preparing a child for a fulfilling educational journey will have ramifications for his or her professional future and life in general. Parents choose to put their children in a preschool environment because doing so positively influences their early development, in turn affecting their further progress in academic and nonacademic areas.

One parent stated that a negative experience in preschool may affect a child’s view of education and learning forever. For example, based on her own childhood experience, Patty argued that preschool academic education could be associated with uninteresting activities and strict discipline that may negatively influence a child’s perceptions, and therefore, his or her attitude toward education in general; however, she was determined to impose a similar philosophy on her own child. She thought that her
daughter needed more structure in her preschool schedule in order to be successful at the
next level and in life.

The participants’ comments regarding parents’ and teachers’ roles in early
childhood education suggest that both family and educational personnel should be treated
as equal partners in a child’s education. The responses of all six parents imply that the
partnership between parents and professional educators is essential. Parents are
interested in their children’s development and should, therefore, have a relationship with
teachers in general and cooperate with them as much as they can. All six were active
participants in their children’s early childhood development as indicated through their
participation in extracurricular activities and meetings, some less than others, only
because of other life responsibilities.

Sometimes, parents sought out professional educators instead of family for child
care as in the case of Donna. Although parents are the primary caregiver, the assistance
of the child’s teachers is indispensable.

According to the interviewed parents, families should work closely with teachers
to ensure a smooth transition into a school culture. In this context, culture should be
treated as norms of behavior within a society, in this case school. The parents’ answers
show that they believed their children’s development should take place in the social
context presented not only by the family members but also by teachers, peers, and
different adults who may interact with them. These parents believed a child’s
interactions with the social surroundings within which he or she lives are highly
significant for both early development in school and in life.
All six of these parents believed that preschool education plays an essential role in a child’s academic preparation and educational future in general, but they had different views on how a preschool educational setting should and does prepare a child for elementary school. For example, for Patty, a preschool should provide a child the tools essential to perform effectively in school and to avoid failure; it should provide children with academic success from the outset. According to Jennifer, preschool education should provide children with necessary test-taking skills that will be useful in their future educational lives as well as introduce them to a variety of mediums, including music and art. Laura argued that readiness for elementary school is welcomed in the contemporary educational system and society, so engaging a child in preschool education is an essential task for the family. Donna believed that children should attend preschool because it provides time in academic activities as well as play activities. The interviews indicate that the participants perceived preschools as establishments focused on training that best prepares children for future learning, and they, therefore, felt the need for professional programs for the sake of their children’s proper academic preparation.

The study findings also show that preschool education has not only academic but also social value. For the participants, early child development should be accompanied by the socialization process, which allows children to acquire communicative skills, to learn how to interact with people or to get along with them, to gain both positive and negative social experience, and to develop essential characteristics, such as attentiveness, respect for others, and self-confidence. According to the participants parents must involve children in interpersonal interaction, both academics- and play-based, at home, in
preschool, at playgrounds, and other social settings in order to enhance their socialization. Parents must remember that social skills are gained through communication and interaction with peers, teachers, family members, and other representatives of society. Four of the five parents commented that contemporary society and technology do not encourage face-to-face interaction; thus, they feared the loss of skills associated with proper communication.

The answers of the participants show that they valued early development for their children, not only in terms of gaining both academic and social experiences but also in terms of preparing for their futures. The interviewed parents indicated that a child’s future is influenced by his or her own early experiences, family, teachers, and peers in both positive and negative ways. These parents paid special attention to all influences to which their children were exposed; in addition, to ensure a successful personal and professional future for a child, parents are recommended to provide good examples, guidance, support, and advice to their children.

Interviews with the participants demonstrate that various factors influenced their preschool choice. For example, Connie thought that her choice of a preschool for her children was much more influenced by her past experience and the school’s reputation than its location. Mike said that location mattered because it ensured social connections for his child, so he gave preference to the educational settings located in his own neighborhood. Laura’s choice was determined by visiting various schools, reading articles, and performing online research. For Patty, cost was an important factor in her preschool choice because she thought that expensive tuition is an indicator of quality.
Jennifer believed that the opportunity for organized interaction among children, parents, and teachers is the most significant factor in choosing a preschool educational setting. Donna’s decision was guided by her desire to find a safe preschool located near her home and staffed with caring personnel. These parents’ answers demonstrate that various factors mattered for parents when they search for an optimal preschool setting for their children. All families interested in selecting appropriate establishments for their children need to take into consideration that these factors may include parents’ own experiences, school’s reputation, cost, and location.

According to the interview results, the participants had certain expectations when selecting a preschool. A primary consideration was to select the establishment with a curriculum that best fit their children’s needs; however, the lack of knowledge about early learning pedagogies led to decisions diverging from intent. For example, Patty expected that the curriculum focus on children’s academic preparation through teacher-directed activities, so she did not support the idea of play-based learning; yet her two children were enrolled in a play-based facility. The other five parents interviewed were either content with the play-based curriculum or pleasantly surprised with its positive effect on their children. When choosing a preschool settings and its curriculum, parents can expect their children to receive either traditional academics-based or alternative play-based education. Parents both oppose and advocate a play-oriented curriculum. I believe the participants’ lack of knowledge prohibited them from truly understanding the benefits of play.
The interview results provide some implications for parents in terms of their fears as well. Participants’ answers indicate their main fears concerned their children’s (a) achievements as expressed by the responses of Mike, Patty, and Jennifer; (b) successes in their future lives according to Mike, Laura, Donna, and Connie; (c) inability to build a fulfilling career as suggested by Mike and Donna; and (d) poorly developed social skills as expressed by Mike, Laura, Jennifer, and Patty. Fears regarding these issues are natural and reflect parents’ unconscious desires to save their children from all of life’s unpleasantness. These parents did not want their children to repeat their mistakes or have the same bitter experiences. In fact, all parents should note that fears regarding their children are natural; however, they should not let these fears obscure their children’s freedom of choice. The fears noted above imply that on one hand a play-based preschool may provide children with beneficial opportunities and on the other hand that these parents are afraid that if improperly prepared for real school, they may fall behind and live unfulfilling lives. Some of the parents believed that children’s future achievements and successes depend on their learning outcomes; in this context, if parents see that their children demonstrate poor academic progress, they may feel corresponding fears. Parents worry about their children’s poorly developed social skills; fears would arise if they see that their children do not actively interact or communicate with others and demonstrate few social skills, avoiding direct face-to-face contacts with their peers, teachers, and relatives. If appropriate information is given to parents regarding what they can expect from preschool education and how they can help improve their children’s learning outcomes, their fears may be mitigated.
In addition, the study findings imply that all parents have some concerns regarding their children’s personality and character. These concerns emanate from four different areas: (a) factors affecting child development as presented by Donna, Connie, and Patty; (b) the personality of the child from Dewey’s and Vygotsky’s perspectives according to Mike, Connie, Donna, and Jennifer; (c) the perception of children as little adults as shown in the responses of Mike, Jennifer, and Donna; and (d) the child’s right to play as shown in Donna’s and Connie’s experiences. Answers of the parents demonstrate that some thought that social interactions influences a child’s system of values, career choices, and self-perception; but others believed that an academic program has a greater impact on a child’s personality and character. This study has established that these parents’ views regarding their children’s personalities fell into two categories: The first category focused on the significance of continuous and interactive experiences in child development, and the second one underscored sociocultural formation through interaction with others. According to the interviews, some parents were preoccupied with the presence of adult behavior patterns in their children. The responses demonstrate that all participants without exception supported their children’s rights to play; at the same time, not all parents realized the educational benefits of play.

The diverse concerns of the participants regarding the image of the child imply that parents should treat their children’s development as a multifaceted phenomenon associated with learning, experience gaining, interacting with others, adopting adult behaviors, and playing. The image of the child is shaped by numerous influences and
processes that should be considered by parents, all of which begin with parent interaction and relationships.

The interviews with parents also yielded implications for other parents regarding their children’s communication, which for these participants was connected with (a) technology as shown in Mike’s, Laura’s, and Donna’s answers and (b) interpersonal relationships according to Mike, Donna, Jennifer, and Patty; furthermore, the majority of the interviewed parents, that is, Laura, Donna, Jennifer, and Mike, suggested that besides communication, early personal successes also occupy an essential place in children’s lives. The parents mostly understood their children’s devotion to using technology (i.e., cell phones, computers, the Internet, and social networks); at the same time, they believed that technology is helpful, but it cannot replace face-to-face communication. These parents also believed in the value of interpersonal relationships or friendships with family members and peers in their children’s lives. In addition, for these parents, communication is not the only source of their children’s life satisfaction; in this context, experiencing personal successes during preschool becomes an essential element of early development as well. Parents should treat the use of technology by children as an opportunity to gain technical skills, to support learning processes, or to stay in contact with others. Parents should also foster their children’s communication by enhancing opportunities to engage in live face-to-face conversations. At the same time, they should foster technological proficiency because it may provide the child with an opportunity to build a career. Overall, parents should remember that skills in both communication and
technology are associated with successful people, so they need to stimulate their children’s desire to gain them.

According to the study findings, all participants were involved in their children’s preschool development, yet their knowledge of learning through play was limited. I, therefore, recommend that parents be provided with enough information related to preschool education in general and the specific curriculum in which their children will be engaged in the chosen educational setting. Various parent information meetings should be held to converse with parents and provide literature or support on the curriculum in which their child is enrolled.

Insights for Teacher Educators

The discussion of the role of play in early childhood programs is indeed complicated, even with the considerable amount of research on the positive effects of play and academic development. To respond to parents’ concerns that play may be an unproductive use of time that does adequately prepare children for school, educators must be able to link learning outcomes to play activities (Myck-Wayne, 2010). The study findings provide implications for teacher educators who can alleviate parents’ concerns about children’s early development and play-based education in particular. The participants’ responses addressed two types of early childhood programs: The first type focused on learning through play as the basis for preschool education; and the second, traditional education with educational activities as integral components of the curriculum. In other words, these types may satisfy parents who support play-based learning and those who remain relatively conservative regarding their children’s early education. This
section focuses on the implications of the study results for teacher educators that can be implemented in contemporary preschool education.

Participants’ answers about the nature of preschool education reveal the educational paradigm to which both types of education programs belong. According to the responses, preschool education should prepare children for the future by meeting their educational needs; in other words, preschool educational settings should be focused on cognitive and psychosocial development. In addition, preschool education should provide children with an opportunity to gain academic knowledge and social skills through diverse interactive activities including play that can be treated as an essential part of the curriculum. Educators should follow a corresponding teaching philosophy that would allow children to apprehend the learning program in the most effective way and achieve all the set goals of preschool education. Naturally, both types of teacher education programs should be designed in the way that fits this paradigm.

According to preschool educational specialists in the Alliance for Childhood (2010), play-based kindergartens and preschools that implement developmentally appropriate practices demonstrate better long-term outcomes from both academic and social perspectives than didactic preschool educational settings. The policy offered by these specialists provides the basis for elaboration of teacher education programs aimed at the restoration of play-based learning.

The study findings provide some implications for educators in programs focused on teacher education and professional development. To be more specific, existing preschool teachers can be specially trained to understand child development better and
use practical knowledge of play in learning techniques. In addition, teachers interested in the adoption of learning through play need to be equipped with proper resources that support play-based education, including the instruction and assessment fields, and address the needs of modern children, including those with disabilities (Alliance for Childhood, 2010). As one may notice, such a teacher education curriculum would address the key points provided by the interviewed parents. The program would help teachers to realize that successful early learning is enhanced by play and active experience. In other words, the participants’ perspectives on preschool education would be implemented.

According to the interviewed parents’ answers, many parents treat preschool and kindergarten teachers as caregivers for their children. Some families rely on the professionalism of the early childhood staff, specially trained in both early childhood education and care. These findings provide certain implications for those in both types of teacher education programs. For example, in the case of programs in the field of alternative preschool education, teachers may be trained to use special learning strategies and play activities that make children enjoy spending time in a safe and comfortable atmosphere. In the context of more or less traditional teacher education programs, preschool educators may resort to the following practices: assessment tools, standardized curriculums, memorization, and skill and drill. In addition, preschool educators are urged to collaborate with children’s families; therefore, the teacher must have skills to collaborate effectively with the families on the curricular philosophy of the school;
confidently offer support, resources and research to facilitate the parents’ understanding; and guide their expectations.

The study findings demonstrate that parents are preoccupied with what they perceive as the failure of preschools to meet cultural trends in terms of inculcating moral norms and behavioral patterns to children and respect their rights in preschool settings. Hence, the implications for teacher educators relate to special training of preschool educators on these issues. To be more specific, in both types of teacher education programs, teachers are urged to gain special knowledge and skills that help to reinforce social norms of morality and behavior in children and to ensure protection of children’s rights in the early childhood setting. In addition, these programs should introduce such valuable practices in preschool educators’ work as family counseling and informing parents regarding the key culture-related issues occurring in preschools. If these initiatives were in place, preschool education would follow educational trends not only to respond to parents’ needs but also to strengthen the individual aspect of children’s personalities in a society.

On the basis of the parents’ answers, I noted a key concern related to the early childhood experience as preparation for school. This concern yields an implication for traditional teacher education programs focused primarily on academic preparation as a transition to elementary schools. In the context of these programs, teachers are trained to provide children with so-called school readiness, referring to skills such as knowing the alphabet and numbers and having self-control that prepare young children for formal instruction (Bergin & Bergin, 2011). This type of teacher education program is based on
the need to ensure children’s academic success in their educational future: By first grade, a child must know letters, numbers, and shapes as well as how to pass tests on academic materials. At the same time, another type of teacher education program that focuses on alternative preschool education may also provide children with academic preparedness. In this case, teachers are specially trained to provide children with academic knowledge and skills through a play-based environment. Both types of teacher education programs may meet one of the parental concerns mentioned above. Overall, parents focused on their children’s academic success and school readiness as a guarantee of future success in all aspects of life. If they do well in preschool, they will do well in elementary school; if they do well in elementary school, they will be successful in high school, ensuring a good college education, leading to a good career and a good life.

Another major concern of parents emerging from the study findings relates to play-based education. The implications for alternative teacher education programs may help to alleviate such concerns in parents like them. In the framework of these programs, teachers are urged to limit instructional pressure to ensure child-initiated activities and play-oriented learning. In addition, teachers are advised to follow a play-based curriculum that is process-oriented, experience-oriented, child-centered, and developmentally appropriate (Shen, 2008). Teachers working in a play-based school often devote less attention to learning outcomes; instead, they are more interested in child-initiated processes that assist children in acquiring knowledge and skills in a natural way. When the participants were told this, they agreed that it sounded appealing, seemed logical, and made sense; however, four of the six followed up their approval with “But
will my child be prepared for real school?” leading back to a fear that their children would not be successful.

**Fear of the Unknown**

All six parents recognized the significance of early socialization in their children’s development and preschool education. The implementation of both types of teacher education programs may help to ensure children’s successful socialization, which can be achieved if teachers focus on their students’ acquisition of social skills in classrooms and beyond. In this context, teachers in traditional programs should engage children in play leading to the formation of socially acceptable behaviors that enable them to interact with others effectively by avoiding socially unacceptable responses. In play-based programs, interactive exercises that include collaboration and partnership can be initiated by a teacher; for example, tasks may involve following directions and resolving conflicts. If socialization is an essential process in people’s lives, teacher education programs focused on control and assessment of children’s adoption of socially acceptable behaviors indeed seem to make sense; however, involving children in open-ended conversation, exploring, investigating, providing a natural opportunity for socialization by inviting them to experience is more natural, but unless shared with parents, its success is unknown. With successful and early socialization, preschool teachers increase children’s academic progress, ensure peer acceptance, and make teacher–student relations productive.

The interviewed parents implied that one of the essential tasks of preschool education is to prepare children for their futures. This idea provides the implications for
corresponding teacher educators that can be implemented both in alternative play-based preschools and traditional academics-based preschools. Teachers are urged to offer diverse learning activities that arouse children’s interest in a variety of professional spheres. In addition, educators may involve children in activities that stimulate their freedom of choice and independence and develop essential character traits, for example, patience, honesty, faithfulness, and ambition, that will be especially useful in their adult lives. Overall, young children are impressionable; and with proper guidance in an inviting setting, they can transform into young individuals with their own personal characteristics, interests, and desires. In this sense, teacher education programs can be seen as the instruments to ensure this transformation and children’s futures.

A general focus on the future dominates every aspect of the lives of contemporary children. In education, an intense anxiety about the future has driven the standards movement (Crain, 2003). In a society so powerfully aimed at the future, parents have trouble thinking about education in any other terms. These six parents all agree that they want their children to be nurtured; however, they are so obsessed with preparing their children for the future that they are missing experiences they need in the present.

According to the interviews, parents have many fears related to their children’s achievements, future lives, professional careers, and social development. Teacher education programs may, therefore, be treated as the instruments for the mitigation of these parents’ fears and as fear eliminators for preschool educators. For example, play-oriented programs can reduce fears by engaging children in play-oriented activities, such as imaginative play, manipulative play, block play, and games, allowing them to
experience personal success by engaging in their own personal interests, to realize their own voices, to feel their own strengths in certain activities, and to adopt socially acceptable behavior models. Academics-based programs help teachers design individual exercises that help students to apprehend certain knowledge, to gain essential social skills, and to prepare for a variety of challenges in a more formal and organized fashion. Both types of teacher education programs should place special emphasis on the development of children’s problem-solving and decision-making skills. Overall, the opportunity to limit parents’ fears makes teacher education programs valuable for parents and their children from a practical perspective. Although fears for children’s lives and futures are natural, professional support should be provided in preschool settings to assist children effectively; in this context, the role of teacher education programs should not be underestimated.

Another major issue among the interviewed parents is child personality and character development. Thus, appropriate teacher education programs should be designed in order to prepare educators to serve as the main assistants in the formation of children’s personalities and characters. In the case of both types of programs, teachers are advised to adapt Dewey’s and Vygotsky’s philosophies to the preschool environment; in other words, teachers should provide students with opportunities to learn from their own experience and to interact with others for the achievement of a common goal as much as they can. In addition, teachers and children should work collaboratively to initiate creative tasks that can help the latter to express their own independent selves.
Collaboratively, parents and teachers can enhance the development of children’s individuality.

The participants’ responses suggest that children’s communication should be enhanced through both technology use and close interpersonal relationships. This idea may serve as the basis for designing teacher education programs that would train teachers to provide children experiences in both live and online communication; this strategy is appropriate for both types of teacher education programs. For example, teachers are urged to engage students in activities that suppose both technology use and live communication. At the same time teachers should give preference to face-to-face communication and the establishment of close relationships among peers. Overall, teacher education programs not only help teachers train children to acquire elementary technical skills but also let them recognize the value of face-to-face conversations and social interaction.

The study findings provide implications for the implementation of corresponding teacher education programs that enhance and streamline cognitive and psychosocial development of children. Although academics-based and play-based teacher education programs differ in their foundations, they involve the same elements: (a) the presence of activities involving interaction, (b) emphasis on gaining academic knowledge and social skills, (c) an organized learning process, and (d) educators’ special preparation in child cognitive abilities and psychology. At the same time, against the background of traditional academics-based programs, the alternative ones, those focused on the application of learning through play, indeed seem attractive because in them the early
development process within the play-based learning paradigm is reconsidered. Because contemporary preschool settings lack this type of teacher education programs on site, national preschool educators should pay special attention to them.

**Future Research**

The following section focuses on further investigation in the fields of early child development and play-based education in the preschool. The study findings identify the specific issues associated with learning through play that require further research: (a) student diversity, (b) socioeconomic perspectives, (c) culture underlying play-based education, and (d) play-based learning programs. This section includes recommended areas for future research for which the present study can serve as a theoretical foundation.

**Student Diversity in the Play-Based Educational Paradigm**

This study addressed diversity only in terms of play-based as opposed to academics-based learning activities implemented in contemporary preschool settings, but student diversity in the play-based educational paradigm has not been addressed. To implement the play-based paradigm successfully in the preschool settings, policymakers and educators should take into account the diversity of preschool students; thus research on preschool student diversity is essential.

Social diversity is one of the distinctive features of contemporary preschool educational settings. Overall, diverse learners include individuals from racially, ethnically, culturally, and linguistically dissimilar families and communities of varying socioeconomic status (Cole, 2008). Student diversity, a widely held postulate of the educational system, ensures educational excellence and learning success for all children.
without exception. The No Child Left Behind Act required that all children should receive education on equal rights, so responding to student diversity is mandatory for all U.S. educational settings (Onis, 2005); however, in reality, the issue of student diversity has not been properly met because not all appropriate educational tools are available.

The topic of student diversity in preschool educational establishments, therefore, remains urgent.

In the context of preschool establishments, implementing learning through play and the issue of student diversity should be of primary importance; hence, further investigation should focus on the way in which the effectiveness of play-based education can be ensured for all ethnic, racial, cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic groups of preschool students.

To address student diversity in the framework of play-based learning, future studies may focus on several issues. First, further investigation may focus on the identification of diverse student groups for which the implementation of play-based education is most beneficial. Second, the relationship between student diversity and academic progress, especially in terms of activities involving gaining active experience and social interaction, can be illuminated in future research. Third, the benefits of a play-based curriculum in preschool special education can also be investigated. These issues will help to reveal the effectiveness of learning through play for all children.

Several topics associated with student diversity are recommended for future research: (a) the effectiveness of a play-based curriculum for ethnically diverse preschool children; (b) the academic progress of culturally diverse preschool students in play-based
learning, that is, both immigrants and native-born citizens; (c) play-based education for native speakers of English and English language learners; (d) educational approaches to learning through play for preschool students from different socioeconomic backgrounds; and (e) implementation of a play-based curriculum in a public, urban setting in contrast to its use at Commercial Preschool, a private preschool located in an affluent neighborhood, where professionals lived. These topics are not the only ones to which further research can be dedicated; this list can be expanded to include, for example, the challenges, prospects, advantages, and disadvantages of play-based education for diverse students.

Overall, student diversity seems to be an essential topic in the field of preschool play-based education, and future research can focus on a wide range of related issues.

**Play-Based Curriculum From a Socioeconomic Perspective**

Although this study focused on an early childhood play-based curriculum, the findings lack a socioeconomic component. In order to introduce a play-based curriculum on a broader scale, state authorities and education policymakers need to take into consideration different socioeconomic factors influencing the success and effectiveness of this educational initiative.

All educational policies implemented in each state, including the initiative associated with the introduction of play-based curriculum, require investments from local education authorities. The implementation of this curriculum in any preschool setting can be a relatively expensive process, and authorities may simply not have the financial resources necessary for its realization. In addition, the effectiveness of play-based learning is still disputed in political and educational circles, so governmental bodies may
be reluctant to allocate sufficient funds to this unproven educational initiative. For this reason, further investigations can focus on the problems associated with the implementation of play-based curriculum in preschool settings. Future research may be dedicated to (a) the cost-effectiveness of the implementation of a play-based curriculum; (b) the potential of play-based education to yield benefits, such as improved learning outcomes and increased academic progress; and (c) practical measures ensuring that its benefits outweigh the costs of its introduction to educational establishments.

Expenditures can be seen as the additional socioeconomic factor that makes the implementation of play-based curriculum challenging. The introduction of the play-based curriculum into the preschool settings can be accompanied by the revision of existing learning programs that in turn may necessitate hiring additional staff, including highly qualified specialists in play-based teaching. Hiring and retaining new staff requires additional expenditures that can be allocated only if the amount of local funds is increased. Because local funding is provided mostly by parents, future researchers can explore the following issues: (a) the effect of implementing a play-based curriculum on local funding, (b) retraining the preschool staff for curriculum implementation, (c) alternative ways to minimize expenditures, and (d) cost to parents following the introduction of learning through play in preschool settings. Overall, the information provided in this section suggests that a socioeconomic perspective on play-based curriculum is both essential and complex and requires further scrutiny.

**Culture Underlying Learning Through Play**

The study findings provide much information about parents’ beliefs about
play-based education, but they insufficiently reveal the nature of the culture underlying learning through play. To provide an in-depth understanding of the culture associated with the implementation of a play-based curriculum in preschool settings is necessary because this educational innovation gives rise to reconsideration of the traditional educational system and fosters new attitudes about early child development and education. This section, therefore, offers a discussion of the relevant issues and topics to which the future research on play-based learning can be dedicated.

Play-based education is associated with a nonformal type of instruction undergirded by the supposition that children learn through play in an organized way with the help of a teacher’s support and guidance. Because play-based learning differs considerably from traditional academics-based education, the implementation of nonformal instruction in preschool settings leads to educational culture changes. In other words, people’s knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, values, morals related to child development, primarily cognitive and psychosocial, and education undergo changes. Hence, further investigations may focus on the following issues: the philosophy of learning through play, differences between academics-based and play-oriented curriculum, and advantages and disadvantages of play-based education in Western educational culture.

Cultural changes often happen at different social levels, so one may suppose that the implementation of play-based education in preschool settings will lead to altered perceptions of educators, parents, preschool students, and society in general. If this nontraditional instruction is introduced in preschools, educators will treat teaching as a
supportive and guiding activity and will recognize the value of developmentally appropriate, process-focused, experience-oriented, and child-centered learning practices.

Parents may treat this educational initiative as an opportunity to improve both the conventional educational system and preschool students’ learning outcomes. Preschool students may respond to the implementation of play-based curriculum in their own way; they will behave more naturally in classrooms and treat learning as fun, as an engaging, life-long activity allowing them to explore the world joyfully. In the context of society’s cultural changes, learning through play may be perceived as a new page in the history of education accompanied by the opportunity to educate generations to come in accordance with child cognitive and psychosocial abilities. Future research may be dedicated, for example, to the following topics: cultural impact of play-based education on educators, cultural significance for parents of the implementation of learning through play, preschool students’ attitudes about learning in preschool settings with a play-based curriculum, and advantages and disadvantages of the culture underlying play-based education for the 21st-century. Overall, the implementation of learning through play in preschool establishments leads to a major cultural shift, so further investigations should focus on this phenomenon in detail.

**Play-Based Learning Programs**

The present study has provided insufficient information about play-based learning programs that can be implemented in preschool settings; nevertheless, to provide a thorough understanding of the learning programs that help to implement learning through play remains an essential task for the investigators in the field of early childhood
education. The section, therefore, covers play-based learning programs on which future research may be focused.

The study findings suggest that further investigations can be dedicated to play-based learning programs as alternatives to traditional early childhood and elementary education. According to Gordon and Browne (2010), the Waldorf curriculum, the Bank Street model, the Reggio Emilia approach, and the HighScope early childhood education approach reflect varying scientific schools of thought with a common feature: treating play as the essential activity in enhancing child learning and overall development processes. Because these play-based learning programs can be called “precedents for progressive educational reforms” (Lippman, 2010, p. 144), special attention should be paid to them in further research.

The Waldorf curriculum, shaped by Rudolf Streiner in the first quarter of the 20th century, should also be treated as the basis for the play-based learning program that can be implemented in the contemporary preschool (Lippman, 2010). Overall, Waldorf education reflects a humanistic approach to pedagogy and a unique philosophy called anthroposophy, in which each individual is assumed to possess inner wisdom (Lippman, 2010). The central idea of the program based on Streiner’s educational model is that each person should find balance among body, spirit, and soul. In order to implement the Waldorf curriculum in contemporary preschool settings, the following features should be included: (a) strong rhythmic elements, for example, outdoor play and seasonal activities, such as gathering leaves, based on the cycles of nature and human life; (b) environment that nourishes the senses; (c) extensive use of natural materials; (d) play as an imitation
of life; and (d) enhancement of a sense of reverence and wonder (Gordon & Browne, 2010). Thus, future researchers can investigate, for example, the reorganization of the existing preschool curriculum incorporating a Waldorf-like program, the effectiveness of the Waldorf curriculum for child cognitive and psychosocial development as well as challenges associated with the implementation of Streiner’s educational model.

The Bank Street model promoted by Mitchell at the beginning of the 20th century suggests that play-based learning programs should implement a developmental interaction model, rooted in the considerations of such developmental psychologists as Freud, Dewey, and Erikson. In the Bank Street model the connection between education and psychology is strong. Implementation of programs based on this model suggests that activities such as the following should be used to enhance children’s cognitive and socioemotional development: water and sand play, painting, puzzles, blocks and small- and large-group play (Gordon & Browne, 2010). The investigation of such topics as (a) the relationship between play and cognitive and socioemotional development and (b) the benefits of the Bank Street model are thus recommended.

Underlying Reggio Emilia, an approach developed by Malaguzzi after World War II (Lippman, 2010), is the supposition that a self-guided curriculum helps to promote the principles of responsibility, respect, and communality through discovery and exploration in an enriching and supportive environment. In order to understand the essence of learning programs based on this educational model, some fundamentals of the Reggio Emilia approach require elaboration. First, a child is treated as protagonist, collaborator, and communicator by a teacher who performs the roles of partner, nurturer, guide, and
researcher. Second, the environment should be perceived as the third teacher. Third, documentation is viewed as communication. Fourth, parents should be perceived as partners (Gordon & Browne, 2010). The following are examples of topics for future research: the implementation strategy of the Reggio Emilia approach in preschool settings, the value of a self-guided curriculum for early child development, and learning activities typical in the Reggio Emilia approach.

The HighScope (2014) early childhood education approach, developed in the 1960s, promotes the play-based learning programs focused on a cognitively oriented model considered relevant in contemporary preschool settings (Gordon & Browne, 2010). This approach is based on Dewey’s, Vygotsky’s, and Piaget’s philosophies covered above. The primary focus of HighScope is the provision of active learning through developmentally appropriate activities. In this approach the indicators of children’s growth are initiative, creative representation, social relations, music and movement, language and literacy, logic, and mathematics (Gordon & Browne, 2010). Future researchers may explore the following topics: advantages and disadvantages of the HighScope early childhood education approach, relevance of HighScope to preschool special education, and the contribution of a cognitively oriented model to early child development.

Overall, the design of play-based learning programs based on the five educational models described above provides the rationale for further investigation. One final future research topic that has evolved from this study regards the misunderstanding of the word play. All six parents associated play with recreational activities instead of regarding it as
a learning medium. Their beliefs and attitudes might change if their understanding of the word *play* were aligned with that of the preschool educator, who understands play as learning through active participation as well as cooperative, exploratory, and investigative actions.
APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

SURVEY
Appendix A

Survey

Overview

With the reality of the failing academic performance of the nation’s students, parents often feel pressured to place their children in preschool programs that emphasize academic skills, such as reading, writing, and arithmetic.

Early childhood researchers have reported that young children learn best through activities that support the development of the whole child. Recent concerns with accountability, competition, and testing, have resulted in an over-emphasis being placed on academics, including our youngest learners. In response to these concerns, some early childhood programs have turned their focus to teaching academic skills. These factors have led to narrowly-defined curricula, which deny young children valuable life experiences.

Parents who want their child to be prepared academically may have concerns regarding preschools that adopt the play-based curriculum. I am conducting a study of the parents’ perceptions of play-based early childhood curriculum; the information may be useful to teachers and administrators when planning strategies for implementing successful preschool education. This study will consist of three interviews to be completed during the months August 2011, September 2011 and April 2012. Please note that this study will meet the required protocol as dictated by the Institutional Review
Board (IRB). The IRB is a committee that has been formally designed to approve, monitor, and review research involving humans to protect the rights and welfare of the participants.

Demographic Survey

If you are interested in participating in this study, please complete this short demographic survey, sign the consent form and submit it to me at kturk@kent.edu. I will be contacting interested parents within the next few weeks to schedule interview appointments and to provide consent forms requiring your signature. Thank you for your time and consideration.

| Name: ________________________________ |
| Phone: ________________________________ |
| Email: ________________________________ |
| Your Age: ________ |
| Please provide a brief ethnic description: _______________________________ |
| What is the highest education degree obtained?_____________________
| Total number of children ___________________________________________ |
| Total number of children enrolled at Commercial Brand ”_____ |
| Length of time your child has been enrolled at Commercial Brand _________ |
Thank you again for your interest in participating in this study. I will contact you within the next few weeks to schedule our first interview. If you have any questions before then, please feel free to contact me.

Kristina Turk

216 598-9054

kturk@kent.edu
APPENDIX B

IRB STAMP OF APPROVAL
Appendix B

IRB Stamp of Approval

This study met the required protocol as dictated by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), a committee formally designed to approve, monitor, and review research involving humans to protect the rights and welfare of the participants. The IRB-Approved Consent Document appears below.

Informed Consent Document to Participate in a Research Study
Appendix F

Study Title: Parental Beliefs and Attitudes towards an Early Childhood Play-based Curriculum

Principal Investigator: Kristina Turk

I, Kristina Turk, owner of The Goddard School located in Concord Township, Ohio, want to do research on Parents Beliefs and Attitudes towards an early childhood play-based curriculum within a private, for profit, NAEYC accredited preschool located in a Midwest state (The Goddard School located in Chagrin Falls, Ohio, in which I have no ownership or affiliation). This consent form will provide you with the research information, what you will need to do, as well as the associated risks and benefits of the research. Your participation is voluntary. Please read this form carefully so that you fully understand the responsibilities associated with this research project. You will receive a copy of this document to take with you.

Purpose: I want to do this research study because there are multiple and sometimes competing ideas on why parents choose their child’s early childhood program. We know from the literature (Brain & Klein, 1994; Reay & Lucey, 2000) that parents enrolling their children in an early childhood education program using a play-based curriculum may have done so because the school has met their expectations in some other way, not because they are aware of the benefits of the play-based program. What we don’t know is, if parents understand the curriculum; would they have made another choice; would they change their level of parent involvement; and would their curriculum expectations be realistic for their child’s learning opportunities? I would like to record your stories and learn from your experiences.

Understanding your beliefs and attitudes through your stories and experiences will provide the readers insight to the different components of the early childhood curricula, thus enhance parents’ ability to choose a curriculum that is best-suited for their child.

Procedures: If you decide to do this, you will be asked to partake in three audio recorded interviews. Each interview will last approximately 1 to 2 hours. Each interview will be transcribed and shared with you for accuracy and commentary. I would also like to observe you during activities, such as, Parent/Teacher Conferences, Parent Orientation, Day In The Life of a Preschooler, Muffins with Moms/ Pretzels and (Root) Beer with Dad. During the observations, data will be collected through anecdotal notes. The data collection portion of this project will take place over the course of four months. As I analyze data I will invite you to continue to remain in contact with me as a participant by providing you with my assertions as they develop for your feedback. At the conclusion of this project, I will ask you to participate in one group exit interview to discuss what we have learned from this project.

If you participate in this research project you will have an opportunity to explore how your past experiences as a child, as a student, and as a parent as informed your child’s early childhood program placement. Taking part in this project is entirely voluntary, and no one will hold it against you if you decide not to do so. If you do take part, you may stop at any time. Also non-participation will not be held against you or your children.
Audio Recording: The three interviews will be recorded by audio tape for this study; your permission will be sought before initiating the interviews. I will conduct one-on-one interviews in a relaxed, engaging atmosphere and will use a predetermined interview protocol in which questions, based on the research questions, will be asked to you. The questions will be open-ended, and you will be asked to share your responses and clarifications to correct any misperceptions. This information may be useful to teachers and administrators when planning strategies for implementing successful preschool education. You will have the opportunity to hear and approve any recordings prior to being shared.

Benefits: This research will not benefit you directly. However, your participation will help inform teachers and administrators when planning strategies for implementing successful preschool education.

Risks and Discomforts: There are no anticipated risks associated with this study. You will have the opportunity to review audio tapes and manuscripts. If you agree to participate in this study, you can decide to discontinue your participation at any time.

Privacy and Confidentiality: All information collected during this study will be confidential. Participants will be assigned a pseudonym that will be used in place of their names on all files, transcripts and observations notes. Observations will be used as a tool to generate further questions and/or clarification. As a safeguard, participants will be granted the right to exclude me as the researcher from any setting without penalty.

Compensation: You will not receive compensation for this research. However, your information will help inform teachers and administrators when planning strategies for implementing successful preschool education.

Voluntary Participation: Taking part in this research project is entirely up to you and no one will hold it against you or your child should you decide not to participate. If you choose to partake in this research project, you may dismiss yourself at any time without fault or penalty.

Outcome: The information compiled for this research project will be used for a published dissertation project.

Contact Information: If you have any questions, you can contact Kristina Turk 216.598.9054 or Dr. Lash (advising professor) at 330 672 0628. This project has been approved by the Kent State University Institutional Review Board. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or complaints about the research, you may call the IRB at 330.672.2704.

Consent Statement and Signature: I have read this consent form and have had the opportunity to have my questions to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that a copy of this consent form will be provided to me for future reference.

Participant Signature ___________________ Date ________________
APPENDIX C

NARRATIVE IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
Appendix C

Narrative In-Depth Interview Questions

Life History Interview Questions

The following questions were presented during the interviews:

Backward

• What was your most memorable experience in your own preschool years? Why?

• Would you want your child to experience the same preschool experience you did? Why or Why not?

• Did you attend preschool when you were your child’s age?

• If so, what kind of preschool did you attend? If you did not attend a preschool, who cared for you and how during your preschool years?

• Did your preschool experience prepare you for formal schooling? Why or Why not?

• If you did not attend preschool, at what age did you begin school? What is your earliest memory of school?

• What role did play have for you in your preschool years? How much/little value would you say your family placed on play for you?

Forward

• To what school do you plan to send your child for kindergarten and primary school? Why?

• What do you think are the most important skills that your child should learn as h/she grows up? Why?
• What do you expect in terms of your child’s academic performance in the future? Why?

• What is your dream for your child? Why?

Context Interview Questions

The following questions will be presented during the interviews:

Inward

• Why have you enrolled your child in this school?

• What are your thoughts about preschool education?

• How did you arrive at this decision? With whom did you talk—neighbors, pediatrician? Teachers? Did you read any books, magazines, articles in preparation for making your decision? Do you feel that this preschool is the best school for your child? Why? Or Why not?

• What do you think about the learning-through-play concept for young children? (Make sure they have heard of that and know what you mean.) Why?

• Do you think there are other ways of learning that could benefit your child? Please elaborate.

Outward

• What factors influenced your decision to enroll your child in this school?
• Among the factors you mentioned, which was the most influential? Why?

• Are you aware of the state of the nation’s educational policies on standardized testing? How do you feel about this?

• Have you read about or researched preschools before deciding to send your child to preschool? What did you read? How did you research? What did you learn that influenced you? Have you shared that “learning” with other parents, teachers, others?

• Do you think preschool program attendance is important as preparation for kindergarten? Why?

• Are you aware of the early childhood national agenda that play is the best for children’s programs?
APPENDIX D

GOALS FOR CHILDREN AND CRITERIA FOR PRESCHOOL SELECTION
# Appendix D

Goals for Children and Criteria for Preschool Selection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Plans for children’s futures</th>
<th>Preschool outcome</th>
<th>Criteria used for selecting preschool &amp; kindergarten for their children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>To be a good person, attend college, communicate well with others</td>
<td>To be able to interact with others; structure/direction.</td>
<td>Structure, good reputation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>Stay true to herself and her likes; to have opportunities that make her happy and achieve success.</td>
<td>Gains respect for others and learning. Early foundation for educational future.</td>
<td>Reputation, visits, structure, socialization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patty</td>
<td>To be happy, to excel in whatever she wants.</td>
<td>Prepare for elementary school. Follow directions, foundation for next level knowing numbers and letters, socialization</td>
<td>Tour, structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connie</td>
<td>To grow up to be the best person he can be, to follow his dreams, to be smart to utilize every opportunity.</td>
<td>To learn to get along with others. to be ready for K</td>
<td>Past experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>To be successful, to find something that makes him happy, to feel good about himself, and to provide for himself and family.</td>
<td>Socialization, foster cooperative behavior; learn about the teacher’s role in education in order to gain the most</td>
<td>Caring teachers, warm environment that fosters early learning and exploration, reputation, and socialization opportunities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donna</td>
<td>The luxury to follow his heart and passion, not just work.</td>
<td>To get along with others, listen to others, respect others, learns basics to build upon, a head start to education.</td>
<td>Care, reputation, caring teachers, individual attention.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Appendix E

## Events Attended

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Parent Meeting (September)</th>
<th>Parent/Teacher Conference (November)</th>
<th>Commercial PS Community Games (February)</th>
<th>Stepping Up for the Environment (March)</th>
<th>Parent Meeting (April)</th>
<th>PTO Meeting (May)</th>
<th>Mother’s Day Tea (May)</th>
<th>Parent/Teacher Conferences (May)</th>
<th>Graduation (June)</th>
<th>Father’s Day Event (June)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
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<td>Laura</td>
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<tr>
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</tbody>
</table>


McMullen, M. B., & Lash, M. (2004). *Not only left behind, but marginalized: Learning to defeat policies in which children, teachers, and schools become seen as misfits or failures.* Presentation at the National Association of Early Childhood Teacher Educators Conference, Baltimore, MD.


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