An Exploration of Play in Kindergarten: A Phenomenological Study

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This dissertation titled
An Exploration of Play in Kindergarten: A Phenomenological Study

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the Department of Teacher Education
and The Patton College of Education by

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Abstract

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An Exploration of Play in Kindergarten: A Phenomenological Study

Director of Dissertation: Eugene Geist

Play as pedagogy is waning in kindergarten classrooms as state mandated educational reforms are shifting emphasis from developmentally appropriate practices that emphasize play and child-centered learning to standards-based instruction, heavily reliant on standardized measures of assessment and teacher directed instruction. This phenomenological study investigated the lived experience of two kindergarten classrooms, with emphasis on teachers and students perceptions of play and how play was experienced in each classroom. Outcomes demonstrate that the teachers’ perceptions of educational reforms and accountability measures have the greatest impact on the experience of play in each classroom. Each classroom experiences play differently, with one classroom experiencing an average of 60 minutes of play a day, and the second classroom experiencing 5 hours and 45 minutes of play each day. Student perceptions of play demonstrate that kindergarten children view play as a fun experience that is an open-ended and child-directed, allowing them to make decisions about both whom they play with and what they play. Further, kindergarten students shared their perceptions about work in kindergarten. Work was overwhelmingly described as a teacher-directed activity that was required by the teacher and elicited some type of formal learning.
Dedication

For Tom and Abbey.

I love you, family.
Acknowledgments

This dissertation would not have been possible without the support of many people. I must first acknowledge my dissertation chair and doctoral advisor, Dr. Eugene Geist. I could never fully express my appreciation for the time and energy you devoted to my success in not only completing this dissertation, but my doctoral program, as well. Thank you for your continued and unwavering support.

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I must thank Laura Lemanski and Jessica Wilson for being my fiercest supporters and biggest cheerleaders. Your support and encouragement throughout the duration of my program made the insurmountable seem possible. I am thankful for and humbled by your friendship.

Most importantly, I acknowledge my husband and daughter, Dr. Thomas J. Gibbs and Abagail Grace Gibbs. Saying thank you could never be enough. Your support and encouragement during my entire doctoral program and throughout the dissertation process has been invaluable to my success. You both believed in me, encouraged me, and supported me through every step of this journey. I appreciate your patience when I had to take time away from our family to write, your willingness to read, edit, and provide feedback when I asked, and your love when I needed it most. You both lived
through this experience with me and for that, I will be forever grateful. Not only could I not have done this without either of you, I wouldn’t have wanted to.
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Chapter One: Introduction

Kindergarten is undergoing a transformation. A fundamental shift has occurred in not only what kindergarten children learn, but how. In a new era of standards-based educational reform, focus has shifted from encouraging children to participate in authentic experiences that promote the development of the whole child through play and exploration to more formal classroom structures geared toward the implementation of the new Common Core State Standards that focus on academic content, high-stakes testing, and teacher-directed instruction (Almon, 2013; Graue, 2009; Miller & Almon, 2011). Kindergarten is caught in the middle of the debate about what is appropriate for young children as it shares features with both early childhood education, adhering to a focus on developmentally appropriate and play-based learning, and public education, now standards driven and tied to student achievement (Levin, 2012).

Child development theory and empirical data suggests, “children learn best through direct, hands-on experience” (Feeney, Moravcik, & Nolte, 2013, p. 305). Play, when used as a vehicle for these learning experiences, promotes children’s achievement in physical, cognitive, social and emotional domains. According to the Alliance for Childhood report, Crisis in the Kindergarten, “Children in play-based kindergarten have a double advantage over those who are denied play: they end up equally good or better at …intellectual skills, and they are more likely to become well-adjusted, healthy people” (Miller & Almon, 2009, p. 8). Newman, Brody and Beauchamp (1996) maintain that “play is essential to children’s healthy development and that play time should not be sacrificed” for experiences that are based solely in academic instruction (p. 61). Play, it
seems, can be viewed as, “one of the most powerful learning contexts available” for young children. (Graue, 2009, p. 15)

The primary purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the lived experience of two kindergarten classrooms, with emphasis on teachers and students perceptions of play and how play is experienced in each classroom.

**Problem Statement**

In early childhood education as a whole, play is one most readily accepted and encouraged practices through which learning takes place (Levin, 2012). However, in new standards-based kindergarten classrooms, the emphasis on play is waning (Almon, 2013). Many teachers are hesitant to allow play in classroom as demands of the new Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and teaching evaluations, such as the Ohio Teachers Evaluation System (OTES) are directly tied to student achievement on high stakes tests, such as the Partnership for Assessment of College and Career Readiness (PARCC) (parcconline.org). These tests are not only considered high-stakes for students, as they often determine promotion to subsequent grades, retention in current grades, and placement in programs such as special education and gifted programs, but also for teachers, as teacher evaluations are now tied to students’ achievement on these tests (Miller & Almon, 2009). Graue (2009) maintains, “many administrators see less formal kindergarten activities as wasting valuable instructional time that could raise student achievement” (p. 29). With little support and increased pressure for students to perform well on these measures, many teachers are discarding child-centered approaches to teaching and learning and moving towards a more teacher-directed and didactic centered
culture. Best practices, grounded in and supported by research, are being forfeited as teachers, in an age of increasing accountability, focus on short-term academic outcomes gauged by a score on a standardized test.

Didactic instruction is now used as the primary teaching strategy in many kindergarten classrooms (Miller & Almon, 2009). The most recent research indicates that kindergarten children are spending “four to six times as much time in literacy and math instruction and taking or preparing for tests…as in free play” (Miller & Almon, 2009, p. 11). In an effort to better understand this shift and bring the conversation back to best practices and meeting the developmental needs of children, it is important to understand the phenomenon of play, its definitions, benefits, and the empirical research, of which little exists, surrounding play in kindergarten.

**Definition of Terms**

The following definitions represent key terms used in this study:

**Play:** The six characteristics of play proposed by Rubin, Fein, & Vandeberg (1983) and used to ground this study, maintain that play is intrinsically motivated, controlled by the players, concerned with process rather than product, non-literal, free of externally imposed rules and characterized by the active engagement of the players.

**Common Core State Standards (CCSS):** The Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Mathematics were developed by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers in 2009. Forty-three states, the District of Columbia, four territories, and the Department of Defense Education Activity have adopted the standards (Common Core State Standards
The CCSS, deemed more rigorous than the OACS, are aimed towards better preparation of students for college and career readiness upon high school graduation. (Common Core State Standards Initiative, n.d.).

**Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP):** Developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) refers to the “outcomes of a process of teacher decision making that draws on at least three critical, interrelated bodies of knowledge:

1. what teachers know about how children develop and learn;
2. what teachers know about the individual children in their group;
3. knowledge of the social and cultural context in which those children live and learn” (Copple & Bredekamp, 1997, p. vii).

**Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC):** The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) are assessments that are aligned with the new Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in Mathematics and English Language Arts, replacing the former Ohio Achievement Assessments (OAA). PARCC is slated for implementation in Ohio Schools during the 2014-2015 academic year (parcconline.org).

**Ohio Teacher Evaluation System (OTES):** The Ohio Teacher Evaluation System is Ohio’s new system for evaluating all public school classroom teachers. Teacher ratings are determined in equal part by teacher performance on standards and student growth measures (education.ohio.org).
Limitations

Limitations are characterized as influences that are out of the direct control of the researcher and could therefore potentially limit the generalizability of the study (Patton, 2002). This study may be limited in the following ways:

- Study will involve teachers and kindergarten children from two classrooms.
- The researcher’s training as a kindergarten teacher could introduce a bias. This research study will limit the potential bias by including co-coders/analysts in the data analysis process.

Significance of the Study

The public education system in the United States is undergoing the implementation of a standards-based educational reform that is more heavily reliant on standardized testing and teacher accountability. It is necessary to determine whether developmentally appropriate practice can and does exist within this new framework. As a result of this research, the researcher hopes to:

- Inform legislators, policy makers, and administrators of the importance of play in learning.
- Garner information that will assist legislators and policy makers in the development of appropriate kindergarten standards and curriculum.
- Foster better understanding of the confluence of play and standards in an effort to assist early childhood educators in the development and
implementation of developmentally appropriate curriculum for kindergarten children.

- Inform additional research in an area where little empirical research currently exists.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

This study investigated the lived experience of two kindergarten classrooms, with emphasis on teachers and students perceptions of play and how play is experienced in each classroom. This chapter begins with an exploration of the definitions, stages, and types of play. It continues with an examination of the benefits of play and conducting research with children. The final section of this chapter explores the current literature surrounding play as it relates specifically to kindergarten.

Definitions of Play

Play does not have a clear or accepted definition in the field of early childhood education. Early childhood education professionals speak extensively about the importance of play and its critical role in classroom pedagogy, yet it is a difficult term to operationalize (Hughes, 2003; Lauer, 2011; Rubin, et al, 1983; Saracho & Spodek, 1998). Many theorists, psychologists, teachers and experts in the field provide overlapping, yet often varied definitions. When incorporating the aspects of teaching and learning, it becomes even more difficult to define (Cheng, 2012, p. 66). After an extensive review of the literature, the characteristics of play have been considered and an operationalized definition presented for this research.

Characteristics of Play

While a single, unified definition has yet to be agreed upon by professionals in the field, there is agreement that play shares a common set of characteristics that assist in determining if a behavior is play-based or non-play-based in nature (Feeney, Moravcik,

Table 1

*Characteristics of Play*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
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<tr>
<td>Feeney et al (2013)</td>
<td>• Intrinsically motivated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Freely chosen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Pleasurable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Done for its own sake</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Self-oriented rather than object oriented</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Often nonliteral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Provides freedom from time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garvey (1990, p.4-5)</td>
<td>• Enjoyable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Lacking extrinsic goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Freely chosen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Actively engaging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Having “certain systematic relations to what is not play”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hewes (2006)</td>
<td>• Meaningful experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Tremendously satisfying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• A pursuit they seek out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Absorbing and engaging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isenberg &amp; Quisenberry (2002)</td>
<td>• Dynamic process that develops and changes as it becomes more varied and complex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Active and constructive behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miller &amp; Almon (2009)</td>
<td>• Freely chosen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Child-directed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Intrinsically motivated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smith &amp; Vollstedt (1985)</td>
<td>• Joyful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in Saracho &amp; Spodek (1985)</td>
<td>• Flexible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Imaginative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ultimately, the definition that frames the majority of research and other scholarly work on children’s play is taken from authors Rubin et al. (1983). This definition is centered on the six characteristics of play proposed by Rubin et al., maintaining that play is:

- Intrinsically motivated
- Controlled by the players
- Concerned with process rather than product
- Non-literal
- Free of externally imposed rules
- Characterized by the active engagement of the players.

In this context, play is an activity chosen by children because it is satisfying and personally motivating. The participants in play set the tone for the experience, self-determining internal rules, and focusing on process rather than product. Additionally, play takes on a non-literal tone where children often suspend reality and focus on make-believe, while engaging on a physical, verbal, and mental level with ideas, other people, and objects (Rubin et al., 1983). For the purposes of this study, I used these characteristics as a guide to ground my work.

Types of Play

Just as there are numerous definitions of play, there are arguably as many types of play described in the literature (Feeney et al., 2013; Hewes, 2006; Miller & Almon, 2009). Identifying the types of play children engage in helps to provide a foundation for teachers and parents to better understand the positive impact of these experiences.
Further, in a standards-based classroom, identifying the types of play can assist teachers in assessing the growth and learning that is taking place.
### Table 2

**Types of Play**

<table>
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<th>Type of Play (Miller &amp; Almon, 2009; Feeney et al., 2013)</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Large Motor Play</td>
<td>This type of play incorporates the use of large muscle systems as children participate in activities such as running, jumping, or throwing a ball.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Motor Play</td>
<td>The use of small muscle systems, such as those in children’s fingers and hands, dominate this type of play. Dexterity is developed as children play with puzzles, string beads, and sort objects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rules-Based Play</td>
<td>Rules-based play sees the participants negotiating their own goals and rules for differing play situations. This type of play is often interactive and may involve some type of equipment, such as game boards or balls.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction Play</td>
<td>Construction play requires skill and imagination to create structures. Blocks are a common material used in construction play.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make-Believe (or Imaginative) Play</td>
<td>This type of play is considered by many to be the most imaginative and intellectually engaging as children use language and problem solving skills to act out a story or narrative as they create it (Feeney et al, 2013).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic Play</td>
<td>Children use symbolic play as they take an object and convert it to a prop they need. A block becomes a telephone; a piece of felt becomes a computer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing with the Arts</td>
<td>Playing with the arts allows children to incorporate all forms of art into their play: drawing, modeling, creating music, performing, dancing, etc. Feelings and ideas are expressed through this type of play.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensory Play</td>
<td>Sensory play allows children the opportunity to explore and learn through their senses. Sand, rice, mud, water, and materials with differing textures, sounds, and smells are common.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Categories of Play

A phenomenological study “aims to express…phenomena and events as they give themselves, and it aims to investigate the conditions and origins…of these phenomena and events” (Van Manen, 2014, p. 61). To achieve this goal, phenomenology has “developed certain reductive methods that aim to guard against the effects and assumptions induced by theory, science, concepts, values…of common sense in everyday life” (Van Manen, 2014, p. 61). While much social science research embraces theory, this is not so for phenomenological research. When conducting phenomenological research, Van Manen asserts that “the phenomenologist must be wary of the appeal of theory and be attentive to the ways that theoretical concepts frame and constrain our understanding” (p. 66). In remaining true to the phenomenological approach to research, a theoretical framework was not made explicit during the course of this study, however, the categories of play incorporate an implicit framework, as represented by the work of Mildred Parten, Jean Piaget, Sara Smilansky, Lev Vygotsky, and David Elkonin.

The ways in which children play evolve in complexity and purpose as they grow and develop. Accordingly, the differing stages or categories of play tend to parallel social and cognitive development. Early childhood professionals can use this knowledge of play categories to plan meaningful, developmentally appropriate experiences that enhance development across all domain areas. The developmental progress of each child can be viewed through this lens, as well, as professionals observe and assess the developmental needs of children according to these differing play categories (Feeney, et al., 2013).
Social Stages of Play

Play can be categorized in a number of ways. Mildred Parten (1932) analyzed the social participation of young children at play and categorized the six stages of play she observed from a social perspective. This research found a “correlation between children’s social play levels and their level of maturity and I.Q.” (Bernstorf, 2006, p.6). These categories, unoccupied behavior, onlooker play, solitary-independent play, parallel play, associative play, and cooperative play, continue to be utilized in the field by early childhood professionals today.

The first stage of play, according to Parten, is unoccupied behavior. This stage is characterized by a child who is “not playing, but occupies himself with watching anything that happens to be of momentary interest” (Parten, 1932, p. 249). Parten (1932) further states that a child engaged in unoccupied behavior will simply stand around, follow the teacher, or sit in one spot glancing around the room. When engaged in this level of play, a child may be off-task or simply not occupied with a specific activity. Behaviors in this stage are typically passive and no group participation is seen (Bernstorf, 2006).

Onlooker play is the second stage of play described by Parten (1932). In this stage of play, a “child spends most of his time watching the other children play” (p.249). This stage may see a child talking to other children, but not engaging in the actual play scenario. Stage three is solitary play. During solitary play, children play independently and alone. No effort is made to interact with other children or become involved in their
play (Parten, 1932). While children occupied in this type of play are actively engaged in their activity of choice, no attempt is made to participate with the group.

Parten (1932) describes the fourth stage of play as parallel play. In this stage, children are still playing independent of other children, however, “the activity he chooses naturally brings him among other children” (p. 250). Parallel play finds children playing beside rather than with the other children, although the toys chosen are often similar to those of children at play nearby. The fifth stage, associative play, is group play in which there is “an overt recognition by the group members of their common activity, interests, and personal associations” (Parten, 1932, p. 250). Associate play is characterized by children playing with other children, sharing conversation, and playing with common materials, with no goal or end product in mind (Parten, 1932). Parten’s final stage of play, cooperative play, is defined as play in a group that “is organized for the purpose of making some material product, or of striving to attain some competitive goal, or of dramatizing situations of adult and group life, or playing formal games” (Parten, 1932, p. 251). One or two children determine the control of the play situation and role of the players as they direct the activity with purpose towards a predetermined goal or outcome (Parten, 1932).

**Cognitive Stages of Play**

Jean Piaget and Sara Smilansky explored how play supports the cognitive development of children (Piaget, 1962; Smilansky, 1990). Piaget’s framework, with three stages of play development, mirrors his stages of cognitive development in children. Smilansky, through her observations of children from diverse cultural and economic
backgrounds, adapted Piaget’s stages into her own cognitive stages of play (Smilansky, 1990). Taken together, both Piaget and Smilansky’s stages of cognitive provide another way to look at how play behaviors can be categorized from a cognitive perspective (Feeney et al, 2013; Piaget, 1962; Smilansky, 1990).

Table 3

*Piaget’s Cognitive Stages of Play (Piaget, 1962)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Practice or Functional Play    | • Parallels sensorimotor stage  
• Accomodation  
• Practice motor skills  
• Explore sensory qualities of objects  
• Actions are performed repeatedly |
| Symbolic Play                  | • Parallels preoperational stage  
• Use one object to represent another  
• Use of make-believe actions and roles  
• Mental symbols and imagery used |
| Games with Rules               | • Parallels concrete operational stage  
• Social protocols important  
• Recognize and follow predetermined rules  
• Ability to agree on and negotiate rules individually or in a group |
Table 4

*Smilansky’s Cognitive Stages of Play (Smilansky, 1990)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Practice or Functional Play</td>
<td>• Sensorimotor exploration of objects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constructive Play</td>
<td>• Child uses real objects to build and represent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• A plan is followed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dramatic or Sociodramatic Play</td>
<td>• Create imaginary roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Use actions, objects, words to represent situations or things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Games with Rules</td>
<td>• Rules are utilized to sustain play scenarios</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Make-Believe Play Levels**

Lev Vygotsky maintained that make-believe play was “the basic mechanism for the development of higher mental functioning” (Feeney, et al., 2013, p. 312; Vygotsky, 1977). He believed that in order for play to function as such, it must incorporate a play scenario, specific roles, and a set of evolving rules that correspond with each role. In his view, imagination was not a prerequisite for pretend play, but rather a direct result of it (Feeney et al., 2013; Vygotsky, 1977). Daniel Elkonin, a student of Vygotsky, in an effort to expand on Vygotsky’s theories, described specific levels of make-believe play (Elkonin, 1978; Feeney et al., 2013). Elkonin maintained that “only when children reach the fourth and highest level of make-believe play that the higher mental functioning can develop” (Elkonin, 1978; Feeney et al., 2013, p. 313). The highest level of play, according to Vygotsky and Elkonin, is typically reached during the preschool and kindergarten years (Leong & Bodrova, 2012).
Table 5

*Elkonin’s Levels of Make-Believe Play (Elkonin, 1978)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 1 (Object Centered)</td>
<td>• Roles not named</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Actions focused on objects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• No rules guide play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2</td>
<td>• Roles named during play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Actions follow a sequence that mirrors real life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• No negotiation or argument among players</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 3</td>
<td>• Roles named before play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Role speech is utilized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Inconsistencies in roles pointed out by players</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 4 (Fully Developed Mature Play)</td>
<td>• Roles well-defined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Actions planned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Children stay in character</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Relationship focused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Rules for roles clearly explained by players</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Benefits of Play

The benefits of play have been long understood by professionals in early childhood settings. These benefits are numerous and span multiple domains (Levin, 2012; Hewes, 2006; Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002; Lauer, 2011). Gross and Sanderson (2012) maintain that play is essential to a child’s “learning, productivity, and overall development” (p.50). They further state that as children use play to learn about the world, they experience “key neurological, cognitive, socio-emotional, and physiological benefits” (p. 50). Miller and Almon (2009) maintain that participation in play is critical to children’s development in all learning domains and should be an essential part of the
kindergartener’s school day. Yet, research continues to demonstrate that play is being eliminated from many kindergarten classrooms and in its place, teacher-directed and didactic instruction is becoming the norm (Miller & Almon, 2009). Graue (2009) maintains that the abandonment of play in kindergarten is a mistake, as play “is one of the most powerful learning contexts available” (p.33). Graue (2009) further maintains that when kindergarten teachers have been trained to possess the skills necessary to implement play as a teaching strategy, multiple concepts can be taught simultaneously in a manner that is developmentally appropriate and adaptable to a variety of learning abilities.

In an effort to understand the vital importance of supporting play in kindergarten, it is necessary to have a clear understanding of its’ crucial role in a child’s overall development and learning.

**Cognitive**

Byres (as cited in Lauer, 2011), states that play is essential for brain development, particularly between the ages of 0-7. He further states that the size of the brain actually increases when engaged in play experiences. Recent research on the brain and learning indicate the important role of play in development (Jensen, 2000; Shore, 1997). This research found that play acts as “a vehicle for increasing neural structures, and a means by which all children will practice skills they will need later in life” (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002, p. 33). Additional brain development research clearly states that play helps to maintain and encourage synaptic connections in the brain (Rushton, Juola-
Rushton, & Larkin, 2010). The increase in synaptic connections results in a stronger more efficient brain, one capable of acquiring new knowledge and skills.

An association exists between play and improvements in student learning as children use language, problem-solving, processing of information and memory in their experiences (Feeney et al., 2013). During play, children are always thinking and constructing knowledge. Through play, children demonstrate an interest in and awareness of numbers and letters, establishing a strong foundation for mathematical and literacy competence. Children also incorporate science and social studies naturally into the context of their play as they experience and experiment with the world around them (Copple & Bredekamp, 2004).

**Social**

Humans have a basic need to “belong to and feel part of a group and to learn how to live and work in groups with different compositions and for different reasons” (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002, p. 34). As children engage in play, they are meeting these essential social and emotional needs. Play allows children the opportunity to learn social skills, share power, space and materials with others, and develop awareness for others’ needs and values (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002). Additionally, play encourages children to develop ways of appropriately expressing emotions and cultivating relationships with the people around them. Cooperation, turn-taking, and social language skills are also fostered through authentic play opportunities, as children experience the world around them and develop an understanding of social concepts such as fairness and justice (Feeney et al., 2013). Ultimately, and perhaps most importantly to those
concerned about the benefits of play for kindergarten children, children who have had the
opportunity to enhance their social skills, attitudes, and values through play see enhanced
success at school (Levin, 2012; Tomlinson, 2009).

**Emotional**

Emotional development is evident in every facet of play. When children are
actively engaged in play, they are in charge of the realities that guide their world. They
develop effective and appropriate ways to express emotions and control their feelings.
Play encourages children to express negative feelings in positive ways as they navigate
social relationships and practice the skills necessary to maintain these relationships. It
also gives children the opportunity to develop a more empathic and understanding
attitude as they help others navigate their own negative feelings (Tomlinson, 2009).
Through play, children “devise and confront challenges and anticipate changes” (Feeney
et al., 2013, p. 317). Fears are mastered; conflicts are resolved; hostility and frustrations
are addressed.

**Physical**

Play provides a vehicle for children to grow and learn in physical ways. Gross
and fine motor development is enhanced as children use their bodies in physical play
(Feeney et al., 2013). Play allows children the opportunity to “simultaneously refine and
develop skills that enable them to feel confident, secure, and self-assured” (Isenberg &
Quisenberry, 2002, p. 34). Physical play further encourages children to build the
“strength, stamina, and skills” necessary to succeed in the classroom and in life. Children
are best able to learn when their bodies are “strong healthy, flexible, and coordinated” (Feeney et al., 2013, p. 316).

**Kindergarten in the Literature**

While there is a large body of research that extols the use of play as pedagogy in early childhood education in general, there does not exist an extensive body of research relating specifically to play in kindergarten. To this point, the primary slant of the existing empirical literature on play investigates play in preschool settings and the benefits of play-based instruction in preschool. In short, research supports the use of play in early childhood over any other pedagogical practice, with implications for enhanced development in all domain areas, including brain development. However, the body of literature that does exist in relation to kindergarten is sparse. This research is focused on a few central themes; change in kindergarten culture and teacher, and to a much lesser extent, student perspectives of play. The discussion of play as a learning tool and the known benefits to development all but disappears from the literature when exploring kindergarten practices. It appears, at least in the literature, that once standards based instruction begins, playful learning ends.

**Shift in Culture**

**Standards based education.** Historically, kindergarten has been centered around a pedagogy of play. Children have been provided with opportunities to construct knowledge from meaningful and developmentally appropriate experiences, as they established strong foundations for future growth and learning. However, the standards-based educational reform that has swept the United States has put a greater emphasis on
what children must know and be able to do. Learning standards, currently known as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are driving instruction for all students grades K-12 (Snow, 2012). An increased focus on academic outcomes and student achievement has changed the way education is viewed and often, changes the way children experience education, as well. High stakes testing, as mandated by the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), has changed the way we think about teaching, and in turn, has changed not only what children learn, but perhaps how they learn, as well. NCLB was explicit in its urging to provide more direct instruction in federally funded preschool and elementary classrooms through the use of curriculum standards and standardized testing measures (Gopnik, 2011). As a result, in 2001, the Ohio Academic Content Standards were adopted by the state of Ohio and deemed the “first component of an aligned system that will ensure no child is left behind” (Ohio Department of Education, 2001). The new Common Core State Standards (CCSS), adopted in 2012 and deemed more rigorous, have become Ohio’s new Learning Standards, replacing the former Academic Content Standards. As with the former OACS, the CCSS provide detailed expectations of what students should know and be able to do at each grade level, Kindergarten through grade 12, in English Language Arts and Mathematics. These standards were fully implemented at the inception of the 2014-2015 academic school year (Ohio Department of Education, 2014).

In 2009, the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) worked cooperatively on the creation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). These voluntary standards have been designed in an effort to “set clear expectations for learning for grades K-12 that are consistent from state to
state” (Center on Education Policy, 2011). Additionally, the CCSS are aimed at ensuring that high school graduates are prepared for college and “a globally competitive workforce” (Center on Education Policy, 2011). Currently, CCSS exist in English Language Arts and Mathematics only. As of January 2015, 43 states, the District of Columbia, and the U.S. Virgin Islands have adopted the standards for use in schools (Common Core State Standards Initiative, n.d., About the Standards section, para. 2).

In an effort to meet the requirements of this standards-based education system, many kindergarten teachers are now spending more time, up to 4 to 6 times longer, providing direct instruction in math and science than allowing children to participate in hands-on, open-ended play (Graue, 2009; Miller & Almon, 2009). With more than 90 new standards in kindergarten, it seems that “the bar for kindergarten achievement has been raised so that it is essentially at the level of first-grade achievement 20 years ago” (Miller & Almon, 2009, p. 27). There is no current research that demonstrates, for example, teaching a child to read at 5 years old makes a marked difference in later ability or achievement, as opposed to waiting until a child is 6 or 7 (Almon, 2013). Copple and Bredekamp maintain that many kindergarten-aged children may not be developmentally ready for the rigors of structured learning experiences that lean heavily on academic content.

Many professional and educational organizations are beginning to voice their concern about the implementation of CCSS. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is the world’s largest organization working on behalf of young children and the leading advocate for developmentally appropriate practice (DAP).
Developmentally appropriate practice is an approach to teaching grounded in the research on how young children develop and learn (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Best practices in the field of early childhood likely find their origins in DAP, as children’s optimal learning and growth are at the forefront it’s framework. In a joint statement with the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE), NAEYC expressed concern that the Common Core would apply a “downward pressure of increased academic focus and more narrowed instructional approaches” in early childhood classrooms (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2012, p. 4). Concerns have also been raised about the lack of a social-emotional curriculum, standards based assessments, and the allocation of time and resources used towards meeting the goals of CCSS. Further, concern exists that of the 135 members on the panels that wrote and reviewed the standards, not one was an early childhood professional or K-3rd grade teacher. As a result, standards are not emphasizing developmentally appropriate content and outcomes for children (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2012).

Over 500 early childhood professionals signed the Joint Statement of Early Childhood Health and Education Professionals on the Common Core Standards Initiative. Their statement reads in part, “We have grave concern about the core standards for young children…standards conflict with compelling new research…about how children learn, what they need to learn, and how best to teach them” (Alliance for Childhood, 2010, para. 1). This statement is grounded on facts that they feel education policymakers are ignoring; K-3 standards will lead to long hours of direct instruction; standards will
increase the use of standardized testing; didactic instruction and testing will overtake other more appropriate areas of children’s learning; and there is little evidence that suggests standards for young children lead to later success.

**Standardized testing.** A further change related to the changing nature of kindergarten is the emphasis on high-stakes or standardized testing. The PARCC (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers) and SBAC (SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium) are both computer-based assessments initially designed for implementation during the 2014-2015 academic school year, as these assessments are aligned with the CCSS. However, not all states implemented these assessments, and have continued to use the standardized assessments previously in place.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has been advocating against the use of standardized assessments in early childhood for more than two decades (Miller & Almon, 2009, p. 40). They maintain that these measures of assessment are not appropriate in early childhood. First, many, if not most kindergarten children are not mature enough to “concentrate on the process of understanding and answering scripted questions” (Miller & Almon, 2009, p. 42). Additionally, very few standardized tests for kindergarten meet an acceptable measure of reliability or validity; testing at the kindergarten level has only a 50% chance of being accurate (Miller & Almon, 2009).

These tests are not only considered high-stakes for students, but also for teachers, as now teacher evaluations, such as OTES in Ohio, are tied to students’ achievement on these tests. Graue (2009) maintains, “many administrators see less formal kindergarten
activities as wasting valuable instructional time that could raise student achievement” (p. 29). With little support and increased pressure for students to perform well on these measures, many teachers are discarding child-centered approaches to teaching and learning and moving towards a more teacher-directed and didactic centered culture. Best practices, grounded in and supported by research, are being forfeited as teachers, in an age of increasing accountability, focus on short-term academic outcomes gauged by a score on a standardized test.

**Teacher Perceptions of Play in Kindergarten**

Teacher perceptions of play impact its use in early childhood classrooms. Unfortunately, in an age of increasing accountability, play is losing its presence in kindergarten. While the majority of kindergarten teachers maintain a positive perception of play and its importance, many are fearful of incorporating it in their classrooms as a form of instruction (Almon, 2013). Simply put, teachers no longer feel they have the luxury of meeting children’s needs in developmentally appropriate ways, as curriculum requirements, administration and parent perceptions, and funding shortfalls inhibit its use in daily practice.

As reported in Crisis for the Kindergarten (Miller & Almon, 2009), 142 kindergarten teachers in New York and 112 kindergarten teachers in Los Angeles were surveyed with regard to their perceptions and experiences with play in the classroom. The results overwhelmingly found that while most teachers indicate that play is important for learning and development, it is rapidly disappearing from their classrooms. Lack of materials and funding, lack of support from school administrations, and emphasis on
more academic based instruction that doesn’t allow for play experiences were noted as
the most significant reasons for this disappearance.

In a phenomenological study of 4 first grade teachers, Ranz-Smith found similar
results. All four participants, though highly regarding play from a personal perspective,
felt that the curriculum restricted their use of it in practice. Further, they cited that there
was no time to invest in play as a result of “all that was expected of first graders these
days” (Ranz-Smith, 2007, p. 291). Each teacher felt that their learning environments
must be centered solely on teacher-directed and curriculum-driven initiatives. A final
consideration from this study is that each teacher participant held a negative view of
children’s behaviors once engaged in play activities.

Olsen and Sumson (2000) investigated the perceptions of four kindergarten
teachers’ perceptions of play. As seen in the previous studies, each teacher held a high
perception about the benefits of play, yet only two incorporated any type of play
opportunities into the classroom. The reasons for this lack of play mimicked results from
previous studies. Lack of parental and administrative support, an academically-oriented
curriculum, and a limitation on time, space and materials were cited as the leading
barriers to the implementation of play.

**Student Perceptions of Play in Kindergarten**

Research that involves children, specifically children’s perceptions about play are
solicited far less often. Children represent an often-marginalized population, and their
voice is rarely represented in the literature. Yan, Yuejaun, and Hongfen (2005) maintain
that kindergarten children “are the most important subjects/part of kindergarten life and
learning” (p. 102), and are able to accurately and authentically reflect their experiences. It is for this reason that “young children should be consulted and their contributions regarded as an important evaluator in research on the effects of kindergarten education reform and the quality of kindergarten education” (Yan et al., 2005, p. 102). While little research exists that explores kindergarten children’s perceptions of play, a few themes do emerge in the existing data, particularly the emphasis from children that play and work are different phenomena.

Kindergarten and preschool children consistently identify work and play as separate constructs (King, 1979; Wing, 1995; Yan, Yuejuan, & Hongfen, 2005). When defined by children, play is considered an activity that is freely chosen, not directed by the teacher. Further, play often occurs with peers and is a “fun” activity. Conversely, work does not equal play in a child’s mind. If an experience seems related to a curricular goal or is deemed a teacher prompted activity, it is considered work. In short, kindergarteners view of the work/play relationship is simple; “work is something we must do (and) play is something we can do” (Spodek as cited in Ranz-Smith, 2007).

**Summary**

Kindergarten is experiencing a huge shift in culture. Play-based and developmentally appropriate teaching is disappearing from the classroom. An increased emphasis on academic achievement, tied to the implementation of Common Core State Standards and increased accountability measures, is changing both what children learn and how they are learning it. Direct instruction, with a focus on securing specific
academic outcomes and test preparation skills, has become commonplace in kindergarten classrooms.

Little research exists that speaks directly to play in kindergarten. However, the research that has been conducted focuses primarily on the changing kindergarten culture and teacher perceptions of this change. The literature demonstrates a clear shift in how kindergarten is perceived from the top down, as viewed from the perspective of teachers. Increased accountability, focus on standards driven curriculum, and lack of administrative support are among the leading contributing factors to the disappearance of play. Students’ voice is nearly absent from the research, representing an opportunity to view play and changing culture through a new and critical lens.
Chapter Three: Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to examine the culture of play and play-based learning in two kindergarten classrooms. This phenomenological study explored teachers’ and students’ perceptions of play, as well as how children experience play in the kindergarten classroom. The presence of play in the teaching practices and daily curriculum of these classrooms was also observed.

This research attempted to answer the following questions:

1. How is play experienced inside the kindergarten classroom?
2. What are kindergarten students’ perceptions of play?
3. What are kindergarten teachers’ perceptions of play?

Qualitative Research

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) describe qualitative research as a “situated activity that locates the observer in the world” (p.3) to investigate an issue that needs to be explored. As such, the data that is collected during a qualitative investigation typically comes from working in the field and can take the form of interviews, observations, and field notes. Simply stated, this research methodology allows the researcher to find out what people are feeling, thinking, or know about the topic under investigation (Patton, 2002). Creswell (2013) further elaborates on specific characteristics associated with qualitative methodology that include collecting data in a natural setting by talking to people and observing them in their natural environment, utilizing the researcher as the key instrument in gathering data, and using complex reasoning skills through inductive and deductive logic. It is also important to include the voices of participants in final
reporting of qualitative studies, as well as being open to changing the research method and design as the study develops over time and new information becomes available to the researcher (Hatch, 2002; Van Manen, 2014).

Qualitative research also adheres to emergent design flexibility, or an “openness to adapting inquiry as understanding deepens and/or situations change” (Patton, 2002, p.40). Adherence to this design strategy helped me to avoid “get(ing) locked into rigid designs that eliminate responsiveness and pursues new paths of discovery as they emerge (Patton, 2002, p. 40). As stated in Patton, “(b)eing open and pragmatic requires a high tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty as well as trust in the ultimate value of what inductive analysis will yield” (Patton, 2002, p. 44).

**Phenomenological Research**

In order to fully understand the differing perspectives of play and how those perspectives impact its use in the kindergarten classroom, a phenomenological approach was utilized. According to Creswell (2013), a phenomenological study is one that “describes the common meaning of the lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (p. 76). Van Manen (2014) further states that phenomenological research is primarily a “method for questioning, not a method for answering or discovering or drawing determinate conclusions” (p. 29). Utilizing this approach, with play as the central construct, this research focused on two kindergarten classrooms and how the teachers and students have directly experienced play; “how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others” (Patton, 2002, p. 104).
In phenomenological research, data is collected from “persons who have experienced the phenomenon” through interviews and observations (Creswell, 2013, p. 78). The result of this data collection, through systematic analysis, is a picture of “what” the participants experienced and “how” they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994). To better understand the lived experience of the students in these kindergarten classrooms, interviews and observations took place in two classrooms during a typical school day, over the course of eight weeks. Data was then analyzed, looking for an emergence of patterns and themes from which a “composite description of the essence of the experience for all of the individuals” unfolded (Creswell, 2013, p. 76).

**Phenomenological Processes**

The phenomenological processes that were utilized for the purposes of this study are epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis (Moustakas, 1994). These processes were used to understand and derive meaning about the perceptions teachers and students hold about play, and how play is subsequently experienced in each classroom environment.

**Epoche**

Epoche was an important consideration as I began my investigation. In phenomenological research, epoche occurs when a researcher brackets him/herself out of the study by “discussing personal experiences with the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 78). This allows the researcher to set aside these experiences and focus, to the greatest extent possible, on the experiences of the participants in the study. Epoche can further be viewed as a time to identify personal biases and remove “all traces of personal
involvement in the phenomenon being studied” (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 82).
While it is not likely that all traces of personal experience can be removed, it is important to become aware that they exist. This was an important consideration as I began my research. As a former kindergarten and preschool teacher, I have a strong connection to the phenomenological construct of play and the teaching profession, especially as it applies to kindergarten-aged children. In using epoche as a perspective, through the systematic use of a daily reflection journal, I was able to consider my bias and attempt to eliminate my personal involvement with the subject matter. This reflection journal was used after each observation and interview in the classroom and was utilized throughout the entire duration of this study. As epoche is “an ongoing analytical process,” this process required that I was in constant consideration of my perspectives and preconceptions as the study unfolded, so that I was able to view the experience independent of myself. Through epoche, I was challenged to “create new ideas, new feelings, new awarenesses, and understandings” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 86). The phenomena of play was experienced simply as it presented itself, and not viewed through my preconceived notions and prior experiences. Through this process, rigor was reinforced through a “phenomenological attitude shift” (Patton, 2002, p. 485). This attitudinal shift allowed the experiences that unfolded to gain a deeper meaning.

**Phenomenological Reduction**

Phenomenological reduction refers to bracketing or sorting data to look for patterns and themes to emerge. In essence, “the reduction is a complex reflective attentiveness that must be practiced for phenomenological understanding to occur” (Van
Manen, 2014, p. 221). Once data was collected and interviews and observations transcribed, I then went through and “highlighted “significant statements,” sentences, or quotes that provide understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 82). This is referred to as “horizontalization” of the data, or treating all aspects of the data with equal value (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). I then organized the data into clusters of meaning, combining significant statements and observations into emerging themes.

**Imaginative Variation**

Imaginative Variation required that I utilize imagination, varying points of reference, and multiple perspectives to describe the essential structures of the phenomenon of interest (Moustakas, 1994). According to Moustakas (1994), “In Imaginative Variation the world disappears, existence no longer is central, anything whatever becomes possible” (p.98). The focus of this process was to deter from facts and measurable data and instead look towards meanings in the data (Moustakas, 1994). Structural themes emerged from the textural descriptions derived through Phenomenological Reduction (Moustakas, 1994).

**Synthesis**

Finally, I organized the structural synthesis or a narrative description of what the participants experienced (Creswell, 2013). This synthesis included a description “of the context or setting that influenced how participants experienced the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 82). It is here that I presented a picture of the lived experience of my
participants, both teachers and students, in relation to their perceptions of play and the experiences they have shared inside the classroom.

**Data Collection Preparation**

**Researcher role.** When conducting a qualitative research study, the researcher is the key instrument; the researcher collects data through conducting interviews, observing participants, and examining documents. The credibility of qualitative methods then, relies on the “skill, competence, and rigor” of the researcher (Patton, 2002, p. 14). Reflexivity allowed me to disclose my “assumptions, beliefs, values, and biases” (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005, p. 201) in all stages of the process and further served as a way to ensure rigor (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). My history in education necessitates that reflexivity was an ongoing priority as I conducted this study (Patton, 2010; Tisdall, Davis, & Gallagher, 2010).

I have been involved in the field of early childhood education for the past 15 years. Throughout this time, I have been employed as a preschool teacher, preschool special education teacher and kindergarten teacher for public school districts and privately operated facilities. Additionally, I have taught both undergraduate and graduate level early childhood courses for two public universities, working with early childhood pre-service teachers, practicing teachers, and their students.

While each of these experiences have been and continue to be of tremendous value to me professionally, my time as a kindergarten teacher had the greatest impact on my values, beliefs, and practices as they pertain to early childhood education, curriculum implementation, and education reform. I began teaching kindergarten during the initial
implementation of Ohio’s Academic Content Standards, and was able to experience firsthand the impact this reform had on teachers and children, alike. As a practitioner, my emphasis was always on challenging children in developmentally appropriate ways to exceed predetermined expectations placed on them by state and local mandates. I tried to adhere to and advocate for play-based learning that was grounded in authentic, play-based experiences and the interests of my students. Admittedly, this was not an easy task to accomplish, with expectations from administration that included an adherence to teacher-directed instruction and standardized testing initiatives.

Although I have stepped away from teaching kindergarten professionally, my interest has never waned. I continue to focus both my educational and professional work in the field of early childhood, with specific interest in kindergarten. The past three years have allowed me the opportunity to work closely in several kindergarten classrooms as both a consultant and volunteer. I am able to witness firsthand the shift that is occurring in kindergarten, and public education as a whole, as teachers and students participate in the CCSS reform. I am able to relate to and understand the inner-workings of the kindergarten classroom as I continue to spend time engaged with teachers and students, witnessing the transformation of kindergarten from multiple perspectives. I feel confident that my fifteen years of experience in early childhood and knowledge of child development and best practices allowed me to make informed and appropriate decisions that both considered and respected the best interests of the child throughout the duration of this study.
Credibility. This study employed a transactional approach; this approach aims to increase validity in qualitative research (Cho & Trent, 2006). Transactional validity is grounded in the assumption that qualitative research must be an “interactive process between the researcher, the researched, and the collected data that is aimed at achieving a relatively higher level of accuracy and consensus” (Cho & Trent, 2006, p. 321). This, in turn, ensured a higher level of credibility as I was cognizant that these methods, techniques and strategies were utilized throughout the research.

Employing rigorous methods allowed for credibility by producing data of high quality that were analyzed using a systematic approach (Patton, 2002). Member checks (first level) were conducted, as the teachers were asked to review the transcriptions of their interviews and the interviews with the students for accuracy, prior to coding. This allowed participants the opportunity to check the data for accuracy and any potential reactions (Cho & Trent, 2006). Data and method triangulation occurred, as data was collected from multiple and differing approaches such as interviews, observations, and document analyses. This approach allowed for an increase in the overall reliability and accuracy of the data gathered. Additionally, analyst triangulation occurred. This method of triangulation “provides an important check on selective perception and blind interpretative bias” (Patton, 2002, p. 1195). Krisanna Machtmes, Associate Professor of Educational Research, and methodologist on my dissertation committee, served as one of my two co-readers/analysts. An early childhood teacher with over 18 years of experience served as my second co-reader/analyst.
Research transparency lends strength to the credibility of qualitative research (Moravcsik, 2014; Davey, Gugiu, & Coryn, 2010). Transparency makes the process of research visible as the researcher must be open, clear, and explicit about the methods and procedures used throughout the research process (Moravcsik, 2014). Transparency was evident in my research through both data and analytic transparency, as my coding and analysis documents, as well as all tools used in data analysis, were shared (Moravcsik, 2014).

The implementation of further credibility techniques were employed as the study continued. Prolonged field engagement, lasting approximately eight-weeks, allowed for multiple observation and interviews over time, building trust with participants and learning the culture of the school and classroom settings (Creswell, 2013). When conducting qualitative research with a small number of children, prolonged engagement provided a “rich, detailed understanding of their lives” (Tisdall et al, 2010, p. 68). Additionally, thick, detailed descriptions were used to support the researchers’ findings (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Cho & Trent, 2006; Creswell, 2013). A final methodological position suggests that research with children should “involve as diverse a range of children as possible” (Tisdall et al., 2010, p. 68). My sample of children represented a diversified population, in age, race, ability, and socioeconomic status.

**Research with children.** Many considerations must be addressed when conducting research with children. When research involves children, it becomes necessary for the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to consider the “special regulatory requirements that provide additional protection for the children who would be involved in
the research” ("Special Protections," 2014, p. 1). For research purposes such as the ones conducted in my study, any person under the age of 18 is considered to be a child. Additionally, the IRB must determine if the protocol involving children poses any “potential benefits, risks, and discomforts” to the children and “assess the justification for their inclusion in the research” ("Special Protections," 2014, p. 1).

Conducting research with children as the subjects of research, as opposed to the objects of research is growing in popularity (Tisdall, et al., 2010). Children are beginning to be viewed as valuable resources, with knowledge, insights and information to share that can positively contribute to the research agenda at hand. Tisdall, et al. (2010) states that conducting research with children is important for a number of reasons. First, engaging children in research can open up new possibilities not just for children, but also for society. This type of research can lead researchers and practitioners to question how things have always been done or thought about, and consider issues that may not have otherwise been raised (Tisdall et al., 2010). Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, “recognizing that children should and can contribute to these activities is one way to ensure their interests and views are not forgotten” (Tisdall et al., 2010, p. 5). This will ensure that childrens’ views are not only expressed, but heard by others.

Doing research with children is potentially different than doing research with adults. Many of these differences can be attributed to attitudinal perceptions and must be considered prior to the start of any research study. The first perception is that there are frequently power imbalances between children and adults (Tisdall et al., 2010). Children are often considered a marginalized population, and as such “are not used to being treated
as equals by adults” (Punch, 2002, p. 5). This may affect the methodology selected, language used, or participation level of the children in the study. Next, many adults assume that children are different than adults, and for this reason treat children differently. These assumptions can again impact the methodology used, as well as how information gathered in the field is interpreted (Punch, 2002). A final perception that should be considered is that children are, in fact, different than adults. Children may have a limited or different use of vocabulary and language than their adult researcher, their attention spans may be shorter, and they will have, by the very nature of their age, less experience with the world. All of these factors may impact the level of participation garnered from the child, as well as the richness of the data collected. In each of these instances, researcher reflexivity must become a central part of the process in working with children. It is the obligation of the researcher to reflect critically not only their roles and assumptions, but about the research process, as well (Punch, 2002).

A variety of research issues exist that makes research with children different than that with adults. Central among these is the difficulty of the researcher to totally understand the world from a child’s point of view, validity in accepting a child’s point of view (or “believing” a child’s account of an experience), providing the appropriate context and setting for children to feel comfortable during research, building appropriate rapport, and using appropriate research methods with children (Punch, 2002). I think it is of vital importance to give children a voice and ensure they have the opportunity to participate in matters that directly involve or impact their lives. My primary focus will be to conduct research with children, not on them (Christensen & James, 2008).
**Sampling strategy.** A purposeful sampling strategy was utilized. Purposeful sampling finds its strength in selecting cases that are information-rich. Selecting information-rich cases is of critical importance as it becomes possible to gain greater insight, in-depth understanding, and “issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry” (Patton, 2002, p. 230). In a phenomenological study, it is imperative that all participants have experience with the phenomenon being studied; therefore it becomes necessary to employ a sampling strategy that focuses on a narrower sample. For the purposes of this study, criterion sampling was utilized as the strategy of choice.

Criterion sampling allows the researcher to “review and study all cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance” (Patton, 2002, p. 238). Creswell (2012) maintains that criterion sampling is the method of choice in phenomenological studies as it ensures that all participants have experience with the phenomenon of interest. For the purposes of this study, play was the central phenomenon of study. It was expected that all teachers and children in the study have had experience with play, whether directly or indirectly at home, school and in other areas of their lives.

In qualitative research, few parameters exist as to the appropriate sample size to select in any particular study. However, a few guidelines were taken into consideration. Lincoln and Guba (as cited in Patton, 2002) recommend selecting a sample size that allows for a repetition or redundancy of the information collected. When no new information emerges, the maximum sample size is considered reached. In a phenomenological study, Polkinghorne (as cited in Patton, 2002) recommends that the sample size consist of in-depth interviews with 5 to 25 individuals who have all
experienced the same phenomenon. For the purposes of this research, I utilized a sample of two classroom teachers and 39 children with whom I conducted the semi-structured interviews and observation.

**Sample.** The sample for my study took place in a school district in a rural Appalachian town in southeastern Ohio. According to the Comprehensive Annual Financial Report (CAFR), as provided by the school district, this town has a resident population of approximately 35,026. This town is home to a public university, considered one of the top public universities in the state, with an enrollment of nearly 22,000 undergraduate and graduate students, increasing the overall resident population to approximately 57,000 during the university’s academic year.

This school district is home to 2794 students, with 5 elementary buildings, one middle school, and one high school. 38% of the student population qualifies for free and reduced lunch fees. CCSS was officially implemented in the 2012-2013 academic school year, with PARCC and OTES accompanying the implementation in the 2013-2014 academic year. Written permission was granted by the school district, allowing me access to the school and kindergarten classrooms for the purpose of conducting my research.

Elementary School A is one of five elementary schools in the local school district. There are 352 students enrolled in K-6th grade at this location. Elementary School A has a very unique demographic. This school houses students from approximately 30 countries, speaking 40 different languages. This population is made up, in part, of children of the university’s students and professors, many of whom come to the United States specifically to earn an advanced degree or work at the university.
The kindergarten classrooms I worked in reflected this diverse population. Classroom A is comprised of 20 students, 11 males and 9 females, ranging in age from four to six years old. The students in this classroom originate from nine different countries; The United States of America, China, Taiwan, Russia, Gambia, Ethiopia, Ecuador, Bangladesh, and Saudi Arabia. Classroom B is comprised of 21 students, 10 males and 11 females, ranging in age from four to six years old, originating from four different countries; The United States of America, China, Ukraine, and Saudi Arabia.

Teacher A is a third year kindergarten teacher in the school district. She has 14 years of experience in early childhood education, with previous experience as both a preschool teacher and part-time kindergarten teacher. Teacher A has a master’s degree in Early Childhood Education and has recently finished coursework to secure her Reading Endorsement, which allows her to teach reading in K-12 classrooms. Teacher B has over thirty years of early childhood teaching experience, with 23 years specifically in kindergarten. Her bachelor’s degree is in Early Childhood Education, while she holds a master’s degree in Reading. Teacher B officially retired at the end of the 2013-2014 school year, however, she returned to her original position under the district’s ‘retire-rehire’ clause.

**Informed consent.** It is not uncommon for children to be “viewed as more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse than adults” (Tisdall et al., 2012, p. 14). This view necessitates that adequate provisions must be made to solicit assent from the children and the parents or guardians of each. This was accomplished in two ways during my study. First, parents were fully informed about the proposed study through both one-on-one
conversation with me, as well as a group discussion during kindergarten orientation prior to the start of the study. A parental consent form was disseminated, detailing a thorough explanation of the study, potential risks and benefits of participation for their children, and information detailing the steps taken to assure confidentiality throughout the process. It was stressed that participation was completely optional, that choosing not to participate would not have a negative effect on their child in any way, and that ultimately, they could choose to discontinue participation at any time. The classroom teacher also signed a consent form for participation in the study. Second, each time I visited the classroom, I asked the children if they would like to talk with me or if I may join them in their play. “The importance of negotiating verbal consent with children themselves” is an increasingly common method in social research (Tisdall et al., 2010). Verbal assent was secured from each child at every visit to the classroom. Boundaries were respected and no child was forced to answer questions or participate in the study. 39 of 41 families provided consent for their children to participate in the study.

**Data Collection**

Data collection began prior to the first week of school in August of 2014. At that time I met with each of the teachers and explained the study, the data collection process and timeline for the completion of the study. Interviews were scheduled with the teachers at this time. Further, I collected additional data through in-classroom student interviews, observation and document analysis over the course of an eight-week time period, beginning at kindergarten orientation prior to the first day of school.
**Interview process and observations.** Each of the teachers who participated in the study took part in a one-time, in-depth semi-structured interview. These interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed in a private area to protect anonymity. Field notes and researcher’s journal were compiled after each interview, as well.

Data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with students in the classroom during teacher-deemed play opportunities. I conducted the audiotaped interviews and then completed the transcription of each. Field notes and observational data were collected as I spent time as both an observer and participant in the kindergarten classrooms. These observations, which allowed me to describe and document the scene in detail, were conducted in the kindergarten classrooms during instructional and free-play time over an 8-week period.

The children participating in my study were observed throughout the course of a typical school day, over an 8-week time frame. I did not modify or alter their learning environment in any way. In addition to observation, I periodically engaged in conversations with the children that elicited responses to questions such as, “Tell me about how you play at school; Tell me about how you play at home; What is play?; What is work?” These conversations, occurring in the classroom during normal class time, attempted to gauge student perceptions of play in the kindergarten classroom. Students were not removed from the classroom, nor were they forced to participate in answering any questions. Further, document analysis took place in the form of the review of lesson plans, daily schedules, and newsletters.
**Organization, analysis, and synthesis of data.** “Data analysis transforms data into findings” (Patton, 2002, p. 432). Carefully looking at the data allows patterns and themes to emerge and explanations and interpretations to develop (Hatch, 2002). There are no hard and fast rules associated with how to best analyze data to achieve these results. However, in phenomenological research, most researchers share a common style for analysis: epoche, phenomenological reduction, and structural synthesis, (Creswell, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Patton, 2002) as detailed above. Two co-readers/analysts assisted as the data was collected, analyzed, and synthesized.

Data was analyzed utilizing the modification of the van Kaam method of analysis of phenomenological data, listed below:

1. **Listing and Preliminary Grouping:** List every expression relevant to the experience. (Horizontalization)

2. **Reduction and Elimination:** To determine the Invariant Constituents. Test each expression for two requirements:
   
   a. Does it contain a moment of experience that is a necessary and sufficient constituent for understanding it?

   b. Is it possible to abstract and label it? If so, it is a horizon of the experience. Expressions not meeting the above requirements are eliminated. Overlapping, repetitive, and vague expressions are also eliminated or presented in more exact descriptive terms. The horizons that remain are the invariant constituents of the experience.
3. Clustering and Thematizing the Invariant Constituents: Cluster the invariant constituents of the experience that are related into a thematic label. The clustered and labeled constituents are the core themes of the experience.

4. Final Identification of the Invariant Constituents and Themes by Application: Validation. Check the invariant constituents and their accompanying theme against the complete record of the research participant. (1) Are they expressed explicitly in the complete transcription? (2) Are they compatible if not explicitly expressed? (3) If they are not explicit or compatible, they are not relevant to the co-researcher’s experience and should be deleted.

5. Using the relevant, validated invariant constituents and themes, construct for each co-researcher an Individual Textural Description of the experience. Include verbatim examples from the transcribed interview.

6. Construct for each co-researcher an Individual Structural Description of the experience based on the Individual Textural Description and Imaginative Variation.

7. Construct for each research participant a Textural-Structural Description of the meanings and essences of the experience, incorporating the invariant constituents and themes. From the Individual Textural-Structural Descriptions, develop a Composite Description of the meanings and essences of the experience, representing the group as a whole (Moustakas, 1994, p. 120-121)
Chapter Four: Organization, Analysis and Synthesis of the Data

This chapter focuses on the organization, analysis and synthesis of the data utilizing the seven steps of the modification of the van Kaam method of analysis for phenomenological data (Moustakas, 1994). The primary purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the lived experience of two kindergarten classrooms, with emphasis on teachers’ and students’ perceptions of play and how play is experienced in each classroom. This research attempted to answer the following questions:

1. How is play experienced inside the kindergarten classroom?
2. What are kindergarten students’ perceptions of play?
3. What are kindergarten teachers’ perceptions of play?

Horizontalization of Teacher Data: Listing and Preliminary Grouping

Horizontalization of the data, the first step of analysis in the modified van Kaam method, began with an in-depth and thorough review of the verbatim interview transcripts of the kindergarten teachers. The study’s triangulating analysts, including the researcher, peer debriefer, and community of practice member, held regular meetings to ensure credibility measures were being taken and to validate the process of data analysis. Each transcript was read verbatim numerous times in an attempt to gain insight into each participant’s experience with play. Epoche was utilized with each reading of the transcripts and the subsequent reflection period that followed. Through this reflection process, which included long periods of thoughtful reflection and intensive journal-writing, I was able to more accurately organize the data and gain a familiarity with each
relevant statement. Ultimately, I was able to compile a list that represented each expression or statement relevant to the experience of play.

**Invariant Constituents: Reduction and Elimination**

The invariant constituents identify the unique qualities of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). The invariant constituents were organized from each transcript and clustered by emerging thematic groupings, the second step in the modified van Kaam method of analysis. These groupings were placed under scrupulous consideration. Every statement was considered to determine if it contained a moment of the experience that was necessary and sufficient for understanding the phenomenon of play and further, if it was then possible to abstract and label it (Moustakas, 1994). Overlapping and repetitive statements were eliminated, as were any distracting phrases and extraneous data. This reduction and elimination of data allowed me to determine which horizons remained, thus producing the invariant constituents of the experience. The following are the invariant constituents, as taken from the verbatim responses of each participant.

**Teachers.**

1. Changes seen in kindergarten since you began teaching:

   Teacher A: (Invariant Constituent 1A) Kindergarten isn’t what it used to be…I try to incorporate as much play as I can into our classroom. I know it’s what is developmentally appropriate for them, for children, but I also have this academic piece that I am required to cover.
(Invariant Constituent 2A) It seems that we are doing more 1st grade work now. Kindergarten used to be that you come and you interact with other children and you have play-based centers and you learn your alphabet and your colors, those kinds of things. Now, things are shifting in such a way that those are the things that they are doing in preschool and the things they used to do in first grade, like learning to read and write and add and subtract are now in kindergarten and things just continue to get shoved down. I know, for example, in science one of our standards is that they need to understand the phases of the moon, and that it changes throughout a month. That used to be a second grade standard. My daughter, in second grade, learned that when she was in second grade. That was just five years ago. And now, it’s a standard that we have to teach in kindergarten.

Teacher B: (Invariant Constituent 1B) I do believe that kindergarten is the new first grade. After all of these years of seeing and knowing what we used to do and what we do, what the expectation is for kindergarteners now. I had half day kindergarten before and I always resisted the idea of full day because I thought, “Oh no. They will miss their mommies and they won’t be able to do it.” And then when we did go to full day…of course they loved it. And I liked it because I could revisit everything from the morning into the afternoon and everything wasn’t all rushed in 2 and a half hours. The single biggest change I have seen is all of the testing. A lot of, kindergarten used to just be play; many, many, many years ago, it was just play. We did academic things also but it was
big on socialization and so I have always tried to have a developmentally
appropriate kindergarten. I have seen less play through k through the years and
more structured to get in academics and all of the domains, like in science you
planted seeds once and that was it. Now we are doing tons of hands-on
experiments and other things like that. (A)nd the testing nowadays seems like
testing is everything…we are testing on computers. There is so much more
technology. I always think that well, when do I have time to test them on all of
these things that I have to test them on? So, I always feel really, not stressed but
angst about that…that I should be testing them right now and maybe not doing
something else. And I resist my teaching becoming pencil paper. I don’t want to
become a ditto queen.

(Invariant Constituent 2B) When I was trained, my teaching of k methods
class, it was all hands on. It was play-based. Then I got my first classroom and
thought, “what I am supposed to do with them all day? Play all day? Really?”
The dittos were hideous, but I was drowning. So I am sad to say that I did dittos.
Now, I really try to have a balance of hand-on and some paper and pencil and
tasks here and there. Lots of projects. That’s my biggest change. It has just
become more like first grade.

(Invariant Constituent 3B) Lots of things have changed. But not
everything for the better. Teacher C has said, “Teacher B, I was never taught to
teach the way you teach. My first job I had a script and we had to follow it. I
didn’t learn this in college. We did DIBELS and we were structured.” There was
no play, no fun. Only structured. It sure didn’t sound fun. She never knew any
different. She still doesn’t.

2. Federal and State Mandates: Standards Based Curriculum/Standardized Testing
Measures/Teacher Accountability:

Teacher A: (Invariant Constituent 3A) I think that there is a push for our
students to be better than others. We are constantly comparing ourselves to other
countries and there is a push that if we start earlier students will do better. There
is all of the testing. We have all of this testing from state requirements. Children
need to be scoring so high…we now have the 3rd grade reading guarantee in the
state of Ohio, where children should be reading at the grade level by the end of
third grade or they could be retained. And so I think all of those things have
applied pressure and expectations on children and whether it is developmentally
appropriate or not is not taken into consideration.

(Invariant Constituent 4A) I try not to let it influence the way that I teach,
because I know what is appropriate for my students, however, I am required to do
these assessments with my students and it does take away from what I can
actually do in my classroom. So if I am spending four weeks pulling children
individually to do assessments with them then that is four weeks I am not
spending exposing them to new materials, new activities, new experiences, new
concepts that I could be covering. So, yes, it does influence my teaching. But it
is hard. It’s a balance.
(Invariant Constituent 5A) I think that it (OTES) puts more pressure on teachers than is necessary. For example, this year I have some children that are coming in with little skill and would be perfect in a preschool classroom. If I could just have a play-based kindergarten where they could work on those missing social pieces, then I would say I wouldn’t be nearly as concerned for them. But right now, knowing all the expectations we have in kindergarten, for my students and myself, I know it is going to be a struggle. So, it does make me worry more. Makes me think, “How am I going to meet their needs? How am I going to give them what they need to be successful?”

(Invariant Constituent 6A) For instance this year, we have a new Intervention piece that has to be implemented in my classroom. So every single day I have to take 30 minutes and break them into groups based on their abilities and I work with the lowest groups while the other groups are working on activities independently. Trying to fit that into my schedule now means we won’t get a morning recess because there just simply isn’t enough time.

(Invariant Constituent 7A) I think it was just one more change (Common Core) and it was frustrating. Just to have another change was frustrating. I think in some ways it has simplified what we are teaching children. Instead of having 20 different standards, now we might have less but go more in depth. So that was good. Some aren’t appropriate for five and six year olds. There are many things that really don’t need to be taught now. However, I don’t think Common Core is the real issue. I think that testing is the real issue. But Common Core has gotten
looped into this whole testing issue so it is perceived negatively. I understand some people don’t like it. We are always going to have things we have to cover, things we have to teach. But that really isn’t the issue. Testing is the issue. Having to show all of this progress. The emphasis on data and numbers. The Third grade Reading Guarantee. These curriculums are developed because of the testing and because it is aligned with Common Core we adopt it, whether it is appropriate or not. Common Core isn’t to blame. Really if we want to place blame we have to go back to No Child Left Behind. We can take testing back to that.

(Invariant Constituent 8A) Last year we had to do short cycle assessments for each subject area, each grading period. We had to do them at the beginning of the grading period and then at the end of the grading period to see if there was growth. To see if our teaching practices were working. Of a 9 week grading period, I spend 4 weeks assessing. It is all one on one in kindergarten. You cannot do it as a group. You have to sit down one on one and administer these assessments. Therefore I’m not doing my guided reading groups because I’m pulling my children to assess. I’m not doing my math activity because I’m pulling children to assess. On top of that you had the KRAWL at the start of the year. This year we were able to come together as a grade level team and work on short cycle assessments instead of using ones that were in place. And only doing it at end of grading period. We can now use that data for report card purposes. That makes it more meaningful to us as teachers. We also were able to change
our report cards to be more appropriate for kindergarten. Mastery does not have as much emphasis. We have been able to streamline the assessments and make them shorter and more meaningful in a lot of ways, so that has been great. But now this year we also have the KRA, new from ODE. The new kindergarten assessment. That seems a little overwhelming. I’ve only completed one section of it and it has taken a lot of time. But it is supposed to focus more on the whole child. It has a social-emotional piece to it. That is good. The idea of KRA is good, in theory. Maybe over time it will get better.

(Invariant Constituent 9A) And it (KRA) is all one on one and will have to be completed during class time. It takes hours per child to do. Hours. I have no idea how or when I will finish it. But, I am required to do it. We also have DIBELS. It is new to us this year. They are quick assessments, so that’s good. But it’s really not quick at all. And it’s beginning, middle, and end of year assessments, unless you aren’t meeting benchmark then you are supposed to provide intervention and do progress monitoring and assess them every two weeks. This all takes time away from my teaching, from spending time with students.

Teacher B: (Invariant Constituent 4B) So I used to think it was standards, Common Core, all of that. Now, I’m just not sure. I’m not sure who drives what. I do know that last year in our math short cycle assessments, they wanted children to recognize and read number words.
(Invariant Constituent 5B) And I thought, What? Why do they really need to know how to read number words? Is that appropriate? They are incredible, some of these words we expect children to know and to read. I still find it incredible that we are asking kindergarteners to do some of these things. To recognize the word “where” or “from” or whatever it is. It used to be that you had to recognize letters and sounds. Now you have to read. Really read. Now I have to check your reading level, your fluency, your site word recognition. It’s more and more and more put on not only teachers but students. We just do so much assessing. We used to be able to just rhyme. Now we have to do blends, and ending sounds and vowel sounds and we used to just use –ing. Everything is changing and I just keep seeing more and more and more being asked of kindergarteners and they are expected to know so much more. And kindergarten teachers are being asked to do more and more and more. There is a higher demand on our time. We have time constraints. We never used to have specials and now we do. We have to get all of these things in. And streamline your lessons for each child. And do intervention. And rightly so. We shouldn’t just teach to the middle or to the brightest kids. You have to have almost an individual profile for each child. Which is …that’s okay. We should. I try to incorporate a lot of that thinking into my literacy time, my Work and Play time. Not everyone is doing the same things. You need to challenge the bright kids and give extra, extra, extra to those kiddos who are further behind. So I think it is more pressure on teachers, especially kindergarten teachers. I worry about up and
coming teachers. Teachers from the University. They might not know that you
used to play in kindergarten and that there is still value in it. I hear of schools that
cut their recesses. I can’t believe it. They say they don’t have time that there is
too much work to be done and I just think, “Oh my. When do their brains rest?
When are they 5?”

(Invariant Constituent 6B) Those informal observations can be used on
some parts of the KRA now. SO, they love to take chalk and make hopscotch.
They make the squares and hop. I can use that for my gross motor eval. Hopping
is something I have to evaluate. I think that informal assessments are very
important. They always have been. Now I can actually use that as proof of
something. I haven’t been able to in a long time. There is still a lot that has to be
directly assessed. I think that the new KRA we are using I was like, “finally” we
can see how they are hopping and that actually counts in their score. That’s a
good thing. But I know some teachers are actually stressed and are like, “But
when will I watch them play? I have to watch them play? I have to make them
hop?” The short cycle assessment in math…these crazy timed math tests. How
fast did you add? How quickly did you subtract? You don’t have that in your
schema at 5. You don’t have that retrieval.

(Invariant Constituent 7B) But why is it a bad thing that people may need
a little more time to digest? And process? Why do they have to go fast? Now
everything has to be split-second. We’ve been through it all, all the programs
through the years. No Child Left Behind, standards, Common Core, short cycle
assessments, new textbook series. Lucky for me I have figured out what is useful and what is not. I have resurrected some things.

3. Personal definition/perspective of play:

Teacher A: (Invariant Constituent 10A) My definition of play is more open-ended, providing children with opportunities and materials to explore open-endedly. Use their imagination. For instance, the dramatic play…even in dramatic play area, I don’t put plastic food there. Because I think if you give them a plastic apple it is hard for them to pretend it is anything else. So, instead, I put inch cube blocks, or cuisinart rods. Then they can use them for whatever they want. They can pretend that it is anything. So I think it is providing them with an environment and materials and opportunities to explore those materials so they can figure out all the different things they can do. Problem-solving, trial and error, interacting with each other, collaborating with each other. Just a really open-ended, use of their creative mind.

(Ivariant Constituent 11A) I think play is very important for children of kindergarten age and higher. My daughter, who is eight, still likes to play. The first moment she sees playdoh she is using it. She comes into my classroom everyday and plays in my dramatic play area and she is in third grade. So I think play is very important in their lives. I think it is different inside the classroom vs. outside the classroom. I think you see more imaginative play outside. They are pretending to be super heroes or princesses or any of those things that allow for
large gross motor play outside as opposed to play inside. I think you can see
some of that in dramatic play inside, but not as much.

(Invariant Constituent 12A) They don’t have those materials outside.
They have to think of everything on their own. They aren’t limited to what’s
provided.

Teacher B: (Invariant Constituent 8B) The word fun comes to mind. It is
fun. It is their choice. I am not directing them. It is self-directed. It is working
together. It is cooperating. It’s not even a work job where I am saying this is
what you have to do now. It is using your imagination. Children seem to be
losing their imagination. Technology seems to influence that.

4. Role of play in the classroom:

Teacher A: (Invariant Constituent 13A) Umm, I think in my classroom it
is really to give them a break from all of the academics we place on them.

(Invariant Constituent 14A) I usually just talk about with them about what
the expectations are for those centers. Not that they shouldn’t be playing what
they are playing, but more how they should be behaving. Using inside voices.
Taking turns. Using the materials safely so they aren’t getting broken or so
children aren’t getting hurt.

(Invariant Constituent 15A) Block building, sensory table, dramatic
play…

(Invariant Constituent 16A) I have a very young group. Some have very
low motor skills and sensory activities are by far one of the best ways to work on
some of these developing skills. They can use their hands. Use their fine motor. I think it just feels good. It is soothing to them. I think you can put things in the sensory table that are academically based and they don’t even realize they are working on those skills… Sometimes it has an academic focus. I don’t monitor it and make sure they are completing a certain activity. They don’t have to. Some children aren’t ready for that. Some children just need the sensory input and output.

(Invariant Constituent 17A) I think you have to be creative to allow for it (play with Common Core). I think you have to be thoughtful. I have to teach goods and services in kindergarten, so I have to be creative. I use my dramatic play area and I put a cash register there and I prompt them with the idea that they can provide a service by being a cashier or to purchase goods. Do they have to do that? No. Do they have to follow the prompt? No. But I do use the dramatic play area to help teach that concept to them. So I think you have to be very creative about how you do it. I don’t necessarily think that Common Core lends itself to that with some of the concepts in there…but, I think you can make it work.

(Invariant Constituent 18A) I think it would be collaborating with someone else who really knew how to do that (incorporate play in common core standards.) Someone who has ideas. You really have to be creative about how you incorporate play into Common Core or how Common Core lends itself to play, so you really have to be creative about those. So, it would just be a matter
of finding ways to make that happen. It would be finding ways to do it.

Honestly, I can’t think of a single one right now. I’m sure there are ways to do
that, but it would be a matter of bouncing ideas off of someone else.

Teacher B: (Invariant Constituent 9B) Children’s social skills are improved when
they have the opportunity to engage with others. You don’t hog all of these things
here and you can be a puppy and someone can lead you around when you are a
puppy and then you can talk about your own pets and it just opens up a lot of
conversations with young children. When you have that playtime, you can do
that. The rice table. They love the rice table or sensory table as it is called now.
I’ve built things in so they can measure and pour and all of those things. Play
builds responsibility. They have to take care of our materials and they pick up
after themselves. They put their blocks away. They balance in blocks. They
build together. They balance. They try to figure out what they can build and how
high it can go and what they can do. They work together. Cooperation and
teamwork and elements that go into play. You get to know each together because
you work together. You talk to each other. To communicate. They say, “Hey
They solve problems, give and take. It’s not one sided, not like solitary at a
computer, although they like to play on the computer. But that’s different. I just
think that building together. Dramatic play together. Using the giant legos they
like to follow each other around and they travel around the room. They are
respecting each other and what was made. They cooperate and share. They
problem solve. Today Cooper built something and then came to work with me. Levi took it apart and Cooper was upset. We are still working on mastering the give and take of play because we are new here. You don’t take apart something someone else has made unless you ask them. So Levi helped him rebuild it. That respect is important. They worked it out. There are lots of conversations that we forget about or we take for granted. They need that time at a young age to forge friendships and get along and figure out that “hey, maybe you have this today, but won’t tomorrow. I may have it then. A lot of things go on with puppets. “We are gentle with our puppets. The puppets don’t fight.” There are just so many things we can talk about and learn through play.

(Invariant Constituent 10B) Last year for the first time I started Literacy Centers. We had a new reading series. We had changes. And I would say I am about 50% acclimated to that. I have chosen things that I think are still appropriate and still things the children like. I want them to like school. And so I modified my class that we have literacy centers and students rotate to 6 different centers each day. 7 centers this year. They will do Guided Reading with me. Writing with a Teachers Aide. Other literacy activities with another adult volunteer and 3 independent centers, and Reading Eggs on the computer. That will be rhyming games I’ve made, or other activities that they can complete with varying degrees of success. Each group is leveled and I try to make the activities appropriate for everyone. But, I will not give up Work and Play time. That is too important of a time. When children can still be 5 year olds and still build with
blocks and build on a regular basis, and have kitchen and housekeeping. It is not just a “special time” on Fridays to play, but an important part of my curriculum. And they have fun. But during that work and play time they do both work and play, I have them come over and do a lot of activities with me or other adults in the room. So they are called over, there are high expectations for them. They know to stop and come over, but they also know they can return to their play when they are done. This morning I did “Guess Who” books with them. Teacher Aide B did riddle books. I also used to always have Story and Extension with them almost everyday, after Horseshoe or Morning Meeting. We would read a story and then do an extension of that story. That is in addition to whatever literacy activities we also do now. I may not do story and extension everyday, but I still make time for it. Yesterday I read the Very Hungry Caterpillar to them. Then we made our own pages for our Class Book of The Very Hungry Caterpillar. It’s the beginning of the year, so they needed a group project. In order for it to work in small groups… I could have done it in literacy centers, but I still want them to work together in a group. We have caterpillars in the room. It is all part of a theme. It takes a lot to make it all work. It’s a lot of work and a lot of planning.

(Invariant Constituent 11B) There are also Math Tubs and Work Jobs in the afternoon. The children are building responsibility as well as working on concepts or domains like math or science. The activities for these are math related, but I also work in spelling, letters, rhyming. I do a lot of cross over.
That’s all hands on. Games they like to play. Everything is created for them, so they are doing it in a 5 year old frame. So the reality is they are not getting a lot of dittos, but they still do need to practice writing, and math, and science, but I try to remember they are only 5.

(Invariant Constituent 12B) I try to make it work for a five year olds brain.

(Invariant Constituent 13B) Kids have jammed packed evenings and you know, soccer. They aren’t going home and climbing trees and looking under rocks. So, I have an obligation to preserve play in school. So that school is a happy place. So it is a place you want to come to. And it is what’s right for kids. It shouldn’t be drudgery. In kindergarten I want them to love school. They are going to have so much asked of them and put-upon them and they are in school for so long. And I just feel like I have to preserve that element of play. I know it is worthwhile. I know they learn a lot through play. Lots of things you don’t even think about. Not just socialization…

(Invariant Constituent 14B) I love using themes. It ties everything together. It brings me back to thinking about building a home. About needing a sturdy foundation. And kindergarten is that foundation. You need a solid start to build that house on. You have to have this sweeping investment in their learning. And children need to love learning. Laying background is vital. Kindergarten is the most important year. When I hear about students sitting at desks, working in workbooks, I can’t even take it. It is the most inappropriate thing I have ever heard. They are five years old. Some are four. They need that…ugh!
(Invariant Constituent 15B) I think that when we went to all day kindergarten here I had to fill in time and I had that luxury and maybe in half-day kindergarten you felt the restraints of 2.5 hours. All day kindergarten I think you can revisit it. I would think that you actually have a lot more time for it (play). Though I guess the thinking may be about the assessments, the KRA, the short-cycle assessments. Expectations are a lot different. Pacing things. You can do all that and reach all of those “have-to’s” through play. If you know how. If you have learned how. You can use play and Work and play time and work jobs to meet a lot of the required “have-to’s” of your curriculum. You can embed a lot, if you know how or have figured it out. If you have that frame reference. Some don’t. That’s what I was mentioning earlier about for example, timed tests. I worry. Let me give you a test to see if you learned what I wanted you to learn. I want to use hands-on, concrete activities. You can do anything with a manipulative (laughs). I hope those things are not a forgotten thing of the past. I don’t want children learning with only computers and worksheets. That would be sad. And inappropriate. I think you start at play and you branch out. You make play your foundation. It is your core. I do like to have fun. It is my personality. I like to have beach parties with my kids. But we are learning, too. I may have a beach party. But we are talking about the ocean and sea creatures and reading books and learning math through exploration of sea manipulatives. You don’t have to take that all away. And again I say they are 5 years old.

5. Parent perception/communication of value of play:
Teacher A: (Invariant Constituent 19A) I would share with them the way the schedule is set up and how I try to allow for play in my classroom. Through centers, through math tubs, even through inside recess. Anytime we have inside recess my block area is open; I bring down games; I get playdoh out; the sensory table is open. My inside recess becomes play based centers. So, I would probably go through our day for them like I did for you. I would tell them that although I have these academic pieces and all of these other things that I have to do with them, like I said, everyday I have at least one play-based center for them to just…be who they are without all of the other expectations placed on them.

Teacher B: (Invariant Constituent 16B) I bring it up in orientation that I have Work and Play time. I remember a few years when we were half day that they were a couple pesky parent years. I don’t know what was going on. It was as though play was a four letter word to them. “What do you mean you are just playing? I sent my child here to learn. Play? I send them to school to do letters and numbers and learn to read and be ready for first grade because I want them to be better than everybody. I got through that by adding more work to the playtime. I tried to balance.

(Invariant Constituent 17B) Before it might have been that I was playing with them, or observing them, or listening to them read, or modeling something for them to do. And so now I have maybe 4 people calling people over and there are four expectations of them during work and play time. So they are controlled because they are playing and that allows me the time to call children over and
work individually where they are. To do intervention. To work with them in meaningful ways. So it’s been a good management. It’s win-win. Its management also and I can get work done while the children are happily playing, journal writing, reading, other work. It has been fine tuned over the years. I know that the longer we play the sillier we get. And so some days if there is a project I want them to complete one on one play might get longer and I’ll have to turn the lights off and give reminders a little more because play can be less structured time. It is not really a drawback, but more of a consideration.

6. Time allotted to play/play-based activities: How play is experienced in the classroom:

   Teacher A: (Invariant Constituent 20A) Hmm…not nearly enough. I would say if it’s one play-based center a day, it would be 10 minutes. 10-15 minutes a day, depending on what the center is. And if it is a typical day where we go outside for recess and don’t have indoor recess, it’s that one play center and math tubs.

   (Invariant Constituent 21A) About 20-30 minutes (math tubs). So, I guess it would average 30 minutes a day.

   (Invariant Constituent 22A) Well…I try to give them a morning recess everyday and then they get one after lunch. The morning recess is generally 10-15 minutes and the one after lunch is 30-40 minutes. I often try to push it to 40, especially if we haven’t been able to get outside in the morning. I make it longer… Yes. I think 40 minutes is a good estimate.
(Invariant Constituent 23A) If we can’t get outside for the morning recess we do dancing in the classroom. We’ll do the cha cha or chicken dance or whatever. So that is anytime we have a morning recess inside. If our lunch recess is inside we will do all play-based centers. So, 5-6 play-based centers are open. And they can choose to go to any center that they want, as long as there are only 4 or fewer children in that center.

(Invariant Constituent 24A) But part of my math is that we have math tubs, which are all different types of math manipulatives. When their group is at math tub time, they can choose to go to any tub. They know that you can only have four students at each math tub, umm, and the rules are that you clean up before moving to another math tub, only take out what you need, four at a time and don’t take apart anyone else’s structure.

(Invariant Constituent 25A) It’s more open-ended. Though, occasionally I will give them a prompt or I will add some things to them. For example, right now I have pattern blocks. Later I may add some cards that have patterns or activities for them to do with the pattern blocks. But right now it is just pattern blocks for them to use to make or do whatever they choose. Even when I add materials later, like the pattern block cards, they do not have to choose to do those. Even though I give them those prompts, they do not have to use them that way. They really can use them any way they choose as long as it is appropriate.

(Invariant Constituent 26A) I try to make sure they have as much hands-on experiences as I can, rather, than lots of paper pencil.
(Invariant Constituent 27A) I guess because there is not as much expectation about what they are going to complete by the end (in a play-based center). But sometimes, it depends on what it is. In dramatic play sometimes they might be getting a little out of control and in blocks it is becoming too loud. So sometimes it is situations like that. But that could happen in any center, not just a play-based center. It could happen in an academic center that is not interesting to them so they are off-task and misbehaving just as easily. At least in play-based centers they are always on task. Always. They might be getting too loud or out of control.

(Invariant Constituent 28A) I don’t think I have ever had anyone play superheroes in the dramatic play area. They’ll play it on the playground. But I’ve never had that inside. Not in dramatic play. Not in the blocks. Now, I see them do it on the playground and I’m like, “That’s the place to do it. Go for it.”

(Invariant Constituent 29A) And I’ve never said to them that they couldn’t play superheroes inside. But it has never come out. Maybe the space doesn’t allow for it. Maybe the rules don’t lend themselves to that type of play inside. I don’t know. Is it the materials, do you think?

(Invariant Constituent 30A) Our centers here are much different than our centers in preschool. Those were all play-based, but I would add academic pieces to it. But really, the main focus was on play. Whereas in here, there is a lot more focus on the academic piece, but I always make sure there is at least one play center where they aren’t academic based at all. So, out of my five centers a
day, I always make sure one of those is play-based. So, maybe it is playdough or blocks or sensory table, anything like that…games. Then when we clean up from centers we usually try to take a recess and then come back inside and do our writing time, our writer’s workshop. And I make sure that my children read and write every day. Then we have lunch and recess and rest, but our rest is much different than preschool’s rest. It is 15-20 minutes of quiet time where we just rest and gather ourselves back together for the afternoon. Then in the afternoon, we do a calendar. We do our math time, where I break my children up into small groups as much as possible because I know that is what is the most appropriate for this age group, so in the mornings they are broken up into their center groups which are five groups of four each. In the afternoon they are broken up into three groups, because I am by myself. So, each group has 5-7 children, depending on how many children we have in the class. They rotate among math stations in the afternoon.

(Invariant Constituent 31A) Usually after math tubs and work jobs we have a snack, they have their specials, music, PE, art, or library, and then at the end of the day we have a closing circle. So, sometimes it’s just a quick goodbye around the circle, sometimes it’s a share-their favorite part of the day, one thing that was hard for them, one thing that they really enjoyed. Then we do a goodbye where we say goodbye to each child like we do in the morning when we greet each other. Then they are dismissed.
Teacher B: (Invariant Constituent 18B) Well, there are elements in play a lot. I’ll justify it that way, that we may be doing more “work.” Work and play time; 1 hour 45 minutes. Math Tubs; 30 minutes. Work Jobs; 45 min – 1 hour. I like to think that there is play in morning meeting, the greeting and activities. I would consider that play-based. I’m not lecturing them. WE are actively involved. 20 minutes. Rainbow Centers. Recess, I have cut out the morning recess since last year.

(Invariant Constituent 19B) I cut it out because of the literacy block. I could not get the rotation in if I had morning recess. Oh! Literacy Block! The - at cave and floam pumpkins, etc, roll a spider game, number words; the activities are such that I consider it play-based. That play is built in. Literacy block is 10:20-11:45. That finishes out the morning. And honestly, when they come to me for guided reading, a lot of teachers wouldn’t consider that play time, but I build play into everything. We might read and then play a game like roll a spider or color word bingo or something like that. So the play is always there. And the children like it. They like school.

(Invariant Constituent 20B) A solid half hour (outside recess). I may push it longer. Teacher A and Teacher C may go out in the morning and I can’t figure out how they have the time. I used to have three, but I have had to scale that back. But we have gym in the afternoon, so I that makes me feel less guilty. I had two recesses until Literacy Centers. They are up and moving and getting time to play and communicate, so I am okay with losing that time. Ultimately, I am
pretty happy with my literacy centers. I like how I have set them up. They really work for me. And I think they are meaningful. And my centers allow for movement. They don’t have to sit in a chair at a table all of the time. The Literacy centers are play also. Boggle is a big one, too. They may play roll a sight word. I get a lot of ideas from my grade level partners. I’m always amazed at the ideas they have and then I think, “Geesh, what is wrong with me? Why couldn’t I think of that?” SO they really are learning all day long in a variety of ways and I hope that upcoming kindergarten teachers can learn the value of that. That kindergarten is not drudgery. That you don’t have to rotate center to center and get tested. Pencil and paper isn’t the only way to learn. However, I do have a responsibility to make sure they are capable of completing some paper and pencil tasks. It isn’t going to harm them. I wouldn’t be their friend if I completely kept them from that type of learning. They would be at a disadvantage going into first grade if they didn’t do some of that “nitty-gritty.” But, they also have plenty of time to play (4 hours 45 min).

(Invariant Constituent 21B) Work and Play means that when the children come in they will respond to the morning message and give me their folder and take care of those opening things. Take care of their lunchbox and backpack. It gives the time to talk to parents also. I’ve also encouraged parents to come in and talk to me, give me a heads up about anything I need to know. Look around the room. Talk to me. I am very open to parents. I am not intimidated by them. I want them to know that we are all in this together. And they are welcome.
Anything I know to help your child is good. Children can go play wherever they want. There is a time limit on the computer. They can go to playdough, they can go to listening center, to painting, legos, housekeeping. Every center is open to them. Yes, every center. We have talked about the class rules. They know the rules; we made them together. And so we don’t run around the room screaming madly, that sort of thing. During this time children are called over to work on something independently or with a small group, whether it be writing or painting a class mural, whatever. And I have parent helpers in the past and I have a grandparent helper and partnership students from (the local university) who all listen to children read. The reading series is such that you don’t send the book home each night with the guided reading group. But I want the children to have a book every night. So my helpers read other books with them and those go home. Those books are in leveled baskets that are labeled with students’ names and they know what to read with each student and then they take that book home. So, they go out with Volunteer B and read in the hallway. She has great book talk and that sort of thing. That is something I would have done myself if I didn’t have her. But parent helpers did that. So, that’s part of work and play. They are getting a homework book. They are journal writing. During literacy stations Teacher Aide B will do a journal writing with them everyday. I will do something with them. So they do double reading and double writing everyday. I mean that they do riddle books or math riddle books and journals and they read with me and with a helper. This is all during work and play time. They get called over. They do
dictations, dictate an entire story to me, a whole gamut of things. It might be, “come over here and do this project. Do a handprint for your Mother’s Day card.” Anything really. So that’s a time where we also call them over in small groups in a controlled environment, so we get a lot done. But they are still playing and getting that time in. Because that is important, too.

(Invariant Constituent 22B) In the beginning of the year it is longer. Everything is longer at the beginning of the year. Work and Play is …children arrive at 8:45 and they start playing after they do the morning message and do their little chores. So let’s say 8:45 until 10:00 when the ESL kids get back. Right now it is longer, until about 10:30. But usually it is until 10:00. And approximately…if we have a project or something we need to get done, we go longer. We have morning meeting then. We just do a greeting, and activity, a story. We might do an extension of the story at literacy center time. But those are the basic elements. They need a read aloud and that is the best time for me to do it. They need that everyday. Tomorrow I will read ten Loopy Caterpillars and then we will do an extension where we come over and make caterpillars and cut out numbers out and order our numbers on the caterpillar. So everything is related to the theme and that is carried out through the day, that theme. Work jobs later in the day will be related to the theme. There might be caterpillar activities as part of work jobs. So, say I started Literacy block at 10:20 until we went to lunch at 11:45 when we go to lunch. Last year I had 6 groups of three. This year I have 7 groups of three. So I am adding reading eggs as a mandatory center this
year to make the 7th center. The post office is open, Teacher Aide B is writing with them, so I have literacy areas open all of the time; that is built in. Also listening center, there is a story on tape. I have literacy games and activities that they can play alone or in pairs or as their group of three. I try to keep things on the literacy spectrum during this time. Then we go to lunch and come back and brush teeth and have recess. Then quiet time. During quiet time I turn on a book on video. We are watching books, basically. It is always related to what our theme is. Actually during the month I have a monthly theme and then themes within themes. The theme this month is caterpillars and butterflies. We did the gingerbread man to begin the year. This month, I will also do color days. I like doing a color a day and incorporating that into our work. We read Harold and the Purple Crayon on purple day, we will watch the Harold and the Purple Crayon during quiet time. We wear purple clothes. We might eat a purple snack. And we will make a Harold and the Purple Crayon class mural. On brown day we will read Brown Bear, Brown Bear and paint with chocolate pudding and on and on. During work job time on brown day they will have their Rainbow Centers and paint with chocolate pudding and let’s be honest. That is not related to anything but fun. So they will sequence characters from Brown Bear during this time and the story is at the listening center so, I try to have everything mesh.

(INVARIANT Constituent 23B) I tie it all together. I try. At the beginning of the year, with the color days, most children know their colors coming in at East Elementary. It is rare in my class that someone doesn’t know their colors. But it
is a great way to ease through September and get to know each other and ease in to our routines and having fun as we learn and then in October we start literacy centers after Work and Play time in the morning.

(Invariant Constituent 24B) Acclimated and really liking school (goal of first month of school). And wanting to come. And bit by bit I have to take away a little bit of the fun stuff and add in more work. But let’s be honest, they can rise to the occasion. They are capable. They can do it. But a lot is still play. We may play more games, like Shake and Spill and we have to try to make groups of five. That may be during Work Jobs, but they are still playing. And the students can handle it because we have eased in and they are ready.

(Invariant Constituent 25B) Work Jobs are little learning activities, little games that I have made during the years. It was initially the result of self-preservation when I was teaching and had 30 children. I needed a time when I could work with small groups of children and not have the other children running amuck, but also be engaged in something meaningful. So, I devised Work Jobs. I loosely borrowed the idea from Math Their Way. I was trained in that years and years ago. And there was an element to that that had something called Work Jobs. You know, it was like you have a little car and you make it go down the path this way. That kind of thing. And then I branched out from there. I made things myself. I found and made activities. I might find a ditto that I turn into a game. You know like matching this number to the number of dots on the gingerbread man. So the work job system for me is this. I have three groups, the
Daring Dinosaurs, Patient Pandas, and Beautiful Butterflies. So, while the DD come over to me we do a learning activity in small group like Shake and Spill, a science activity, a ditto, a number game, so anyway, I can work with small group. Work Jobs will have their learning activities and games to do; lacing, matching, floor puzzles, haunted houses with BOO beans. Lima beans with two black eyes are BOO beans. They match the right number of BOO beans to the number on the haunted house. And so each day they get a different work job. Each day for nine days they get a different work job. They do them all. They do them with Teacher Aide B and she checks them so they don’t put them away until she checks them. But they are responsible for it all. They get their work ready, they get it out. They set it up. They organize it. They complete it. They get it checked. They put it away. There is a lot of personal responsibility. Sometimes if Teacher Aide B gets busy a friend can check a work job. So, they are doing double time learning and they think it is a very important thing to do, to help a friend with a Work Job. The third group are in Rainbow Centers around the room. I have a big room, I can do that. I can change rainbow centers often. I have the old light up desk. They love it. Rice table, post office. I used to have the Lite Bright. Stories and tapes. Dramatic play. They can get legos and bristle blocks out. My Rainbow Centers are great for, and I didn’t even plan for or intend for this in the beginning, but it really encourages children to try different things. Things they might not otherwise try. There might be a little boy, actually I have two of them this year, that just want to do computers all day. Rainbow Centers
force them out of their comfort zone and maybe make them paint or play in the rice table. It exposes them to areas that they might not normally choose.

(Invariant Constituent 26B) Yes, it is an assigned center. They do not get to choose. Each day they are in a new Rainbow Center. Right now Blue Bathtub is one. I’ll take it out next month and add the Haunted House. That will be a house with books and lights in it where they can go and read. It becomes the reading center. So they will go to the Haunted House. It has glow in the dark books in there. In November it becomes the teepee. I have Native American books and nature books in there. I also have a bow and arrow in there. They are in there by themselves, so they can practice eye hand coordination. Future hunting skills (laughs). It is a special center. In January it is an igloo with snow theme books. Then they switch each day. A work job, a rainbow center and a center with me, so I can work with those groups everyday. But it is controlled. It is quiet. It is meaningful time. They can go to the bathroom, get a drink, that kind of things. But otherwise, everyone is engaged.

(Invariant Constituent 27B) They are hands-on activities. This time I have gingerbread men that I have laminated, each with a different number on it and they use a dry erase marker to write the number and wipe it off. I always have a floor puzzle. The floor puzzle is as such can have other people help them and work cooperatively. I take their picture when they are finished. It shows cooperation and problem solving and working together. Gingerbread lacing, hand
eye coordination. They might be matching up upper and lower case letters, numbers, pictures, concepts.

(Invariant Constituent 28B) Yes, it is all of those things. Social Studies, too. I used to have sniffy bottles, part of five senses. I keep that separate now as a science activity. But, I still incorporate that sort of thing. I have clothes to hang on a clothesline that have letters on them. They have to hang the wash and match the letters all the way to letter F. I enjoy making them. And they have lasted because the kids aren’t fighting over them because they are working on them independently. And we learn to take care of things. It’s wonderful. So yes, all hands-on. All reading and writing and math, and just everything really.

(Invariant Constituent 29B) Math Tubs, that was based on Math Their Way. You have tubs and I have eight total. Each tub has a different math manipulative in it. Some are basic and remain the same year round. Some I change. For example geoboards are in one. That will stay the same all year. Each tub has enough material for four children to be at it. Unifix cubes, pattern blocks. Two tubs change each month. The ones I keep, I add stuff to them to challenge them, to up the ante more. In November I have tongs and nuts. They can simply sort the nuts on the plates but the plates also have math problems on them, so they can have six walnuts and three acorns and have nine nuts in all. So if a student needs challenged, they can be challenged. If a student needs more they can get it. If they need some remediation or intervention, they can be successful at whatever level they are at.
(Invariant Constituent 30B) Math Tubs do this, absolutely. And the same things with unifix cubes. You may just put them together and build something. Or you do place value with a unifix train. That comes a little later. And, pattern blocks. I have them that the students are just exploring. Exploration lasts the first month. I have cards. Some children will use the cards to put the blocks on and make a butterfly. The next stage would be to look at the butterfly and make it on the floor beside it. And so on. I put seasonal things in throughout the year.

(Invariant Constituent 31B) Yes. They are learning math through play. Yes. It is play-based. The children help me make colored pasta. They make noodle necklaces. That becomes a math tub. They can take the necklaces home. Prior to that I have lacing shapes. They are making things, working on eye-hand coordination, classifying, addition, subtraction. All of those things come. Problem solving.

(Invariant Constituent 32B) Like dominoes. Some students just like to make the line to knock over. Others are working on addition or subtraction. A lot of conversations are happening. Place value. A lot of learning through play happens then. But I also work in instructional time where I can work with children who need additional support. It’s another time that children are actively involved in learning. Some may be having acceleration, working on addition and subtraction. I may be working with someone on one-to-one correspondence, which is pretty basic. So much is happening during this time. Some of them need that today. The math tubs are built in that we can do a worksheet, small group,
one on one, but for the majority of time they are still guiding their own learning. It also affords me the opportunity to play games with them. You learn a lot by playing games with kindergarteners. Cooperation, not having hissy fits because you land on Mr. Gumpy in Candy Land. You have that element of competition, which some people think is bad.

(Invariant Constituent 33B) But, you know I have color bingo, Candy Land bingo.

(Invariant Constituent 34B) It is okay to have rules. Rules govern much of what we do, right? And nobody wants to play with a cheater. These are the rules we follow…you have to have 4 of a kind. The games that I have, memory games, for example. They love for me to play with them. Sometimes I let them win and sometimes I am right in there with them. “Wow, you have a better memory than I do.” There are just so many elements in games that are important and kids really do like to challenge themselves. You have competition in life, you need to challenge yourself, too. We par it down for kindergarten, of course. It is all math related during this time. Math was not a happy subject for me in school so I, I mean I could do the basics, but I never thought that I was very brilliant at it and initially I carried that thinking into my teaching. In (my first job), I was all “We have to read, read, read and I didn’t worry as much about the math part of it.” I had the mindset that math was what I could neglect. Then I was trained in Math Tubs and then took it even further and wider and realized that I could do math and do it well and that it was important. Math tubs afford me the opportunity to do
that. The kids love it! “Math Tub time!” I think they view it as another time to play. They always ask if we have math tubs. They love them. They are playing, but learning important math skills at the same time. It is meaningful to them. I always do them on the floor because they like to expand and stretch out. And it is relaxed. And they direct it. It is a really good time for learning. I know some people have different thoughts about it. We had grade level meetings and I know at (another elementary school in the district) they complain and say “we can’t do that unless it is something we are going to check on a short cycle assessment.” And I think that is sad. I know they are probably missing an important part of their day. But, the students view it differently. Let’s be honest. Kindergarteners work is play. And play is work. So, anyway, I like the math tubs that I can add lots of things to and change it up. I took a class a few years ago with (a local university professor) and was like, “duh” because it was math through literacy and I couldn’t believe I hadn’t thought of these things before. And Mira’s. Are you familiar with those?

(Invariant Constituent 35B) I had no idea about them. They are for older students, but someone was going to throw them away so I took them and my students love them. They are great for symmetry. And I ran some papers off and sent them home and everyone loved them. That was so neat. I felt like “duh.” It’s a simple thing and they loved it. It is now a Math Tub, too.

(Invariant Constituent 36B) They like to lay and relax and do dominoes and think about it and really get involved. So many teachable moments. What angle
do I need? Do I need to create a level space? And they are children for Heaven’s sakes. Lay on the floor. Take your time with it. (Sigh)

(Invariant Constituent 37B) Yes. I see them branching out into other things (evolution of play during year). For example, a student may try out other areas of the room once they are more comfortable. I occasionally have to kick them off the computers and force their hand, but they will ultimately try other things. “I see that there are other things that I might like to do and try…” Little boys who might not be singy-songy may decide to give the listening center a try and then I hear them singing and acting out the story to “Inside a House that is Haunted.” Maybe they never sing at home, but I am going to give them those experiences here. I see it progressing by different levels, to more complex play. Exploring play more in-depth. At the start children are more inclusive of each other and by the end they have determined friendships to an extent. I hate to say cliques, but that is the word that comes to mind. So that evolves, too. But also in my room, you can’t say you can’t play with us. We try to be inclusive. They all play great on the playground. They chase and run and put each other in jail and everyone is involved. I encourage everyone to be included.

7. Outside influences on play as pedagogy:

Teacher A: (Invariant Constituent 32A) I would say my administrator (principal) is supportive of what we do in kindergarten. I think she sees the value in what we do and she trusts that we are doing what we should be doing in the best interest of our children. Generally our school does well, so, I think she is
pretty laid back. She is not breathing down our necks and asking us what we are doing and when we are doing it. So, overall, I think we are lucky that we have that. I would say that my grade level co-teachers agree with me about the importance of play in the kindergarten classroom. There is no conflict about that. I think we are all on the same level that we know what is developmentally appropriate for children and we know kindergarten has changed and it is not all developmentally appropriate, so we have to find ways to meet their needs while still doing what we need to do. And parents…I’ve never had parents question me about play and if we are doing too much or too little. I mean I have had parents question me and say like last year, one little boy had a hard time focusing and his parents would say, “Well, it’s just kindergarten.” And I would have to explain and say, “Well, it’s not just kindergarten anymore. We do have things that he has to be able to do before he moves to first grade if he wants to be successful in first grade.” So, I did have to have that conversation with them. It wasn’t that they were questioning me, really, but more that they really didn’t understand that kindergarten is an incredibly important year to develop some of those basic skills to be able to be successful later.

(Invariant Constituent 33A) Umm…I’d say not really (district administration influence on play). I don’t think they really know what I’m doing in my classroom. Do they provide me with the curriculums I am supposed to use? Yes. But overall, it’s up to my building principal and we have the support at the building level. So, it hasn’t been an issue…yet.
Teacher B: (Invariant Constituent 38B) I mean, I do. I feel like people know me and I’m friendly, and I’m not intimidated by parents questioning me or things like that, and I have answers. I can tell them why I do the things I do. Why I use play. Why we have one recess. When I was younger I used to want everyone to like me. And not everyone is going to. I have a thick skin. I think I am supported by parents, “I want (Student 20B) to be in your room because we play.” That’s what (Student 20B’s) mom said. And I don’t bristle and say, “well, we do a lot of things.” I know what I’m doing is the best thing for kindergarteners. I don’t have to question my self anymore. We all do that. Question ourselves. We all do that coming up through the ranks. I don’t anymore. Maybe age does that. I used to worry I didn’t challenge them enough. That I didn’t have enough direct instruction. They leave me prepared. At least I hope they leave me prepared. I hope they don’t say, “Ugh. I have Teacher B’s children.” So, I know that they learn a lot, in many different ways and play is one of those ways. Administration is supportive. (The previous principal) trusted me to do what was right for kids. (The principal) is supportive of the staff. Parents are for the most part supportive. There are some parents I never hear from that have no idea what we do at school. But no, I never feel under fire. I never feel that. I never feel like I have to explain myself or justify myself in terms of why I use play in kindergarten, learning through play. So, supported, yes.

8. Changes you would like to see in kindergarten:
Teacher A: (Invariant Constituent 34A) If I had time, really had time, I would have more play-based centers and spend more time actually observing them, watching them, then I would actually have a better understanding of what they are able to do in place of these assessments. I would be able to sit and watch. To really observe. Listen to what they are saying. I wouldn’t be asking them to perform. It would be them being authentic. No confusing directions. No prompts they might not understand. No strange pictures to look at.

(Invariant Constituent 35A) I just want it to be developmentally appropriate.

(Invariant Constituent 36A) That means that they aren’t going to have to read a certain level book by the time kindergarten is over. Many countries don’t even ask their children to learn to read until they are 7 or 8 years old. We are asking children to learn to read at 4. At 5. Then we go crazy trying to figure out how to help them read. Maybe they just aren’t ready. Thinking about our expectations for them. Working on the social emotional pieces. Letting them become successful members of the classroom community. Know how to sit on the carpet and listen to a story. Line up. Be a friend. All of those pieces that kind of get swept under the rug because our focus is on academics…can they read, write, add and subtract fluently from five? I don’t see that that is important. It is important, but not as important.

(Invariant Constituent 37A) I would have a full time classroom aide. I would have less children. More play-based opportunities. Providing more
experiences. One of my favorite things to do is bringing nature into the classroom and watching children and their excitement about that. I have monarch caterpillars right now. They just want to watch them. Want to watch them eat the leaves. Watch them hang in their chrysalis. They want to watch as they come out as butterflies. Those things are valuable. It gives me a lot of information about them. So, I would like to do that more. I miss that about preschool. Exploring our interests. Sitting down with small groups of children and talking with children and watching them explore toys and materials.

Teacher B: (Invariant Constituent 39B) I would like to not have to constant testing going on. The tests that we HAVE to give. And you know what, it’s not that all tests and assessments are horrible. Some of them are okay. The volume of assessing we have to do is insane. I really feel a lot of pressure from a lot of different programs and assessments. The Wilson Phonics was handed to me the first day of school and I was expected to use it. No time to look at it or learn it. That’s a lot of pressure. And it’s frustrating. I could have had it over the summer. Anyway…anything new takes time. And Reading Street. That takes so much time to learn something new. I just don’t think I’ll get to the Wilson stuff this year and I feel guilty. Here they spent all of this money on something new and I’m going to let it sit all year. I even have a Trucking Town literacy center. I want to do justice by my students. I want them to be happy. I want them to like school. It is incredibly important to me that they like school.
(Invariant Constituent 40B) They have to be here all day everyday. I want them to like it. I know that I have to be accountable and that there are things that I have to cover. I know I have to be mindful of that. I have to respect what they need to know to be successful in the future. I don’t think that I need to be doing all of this assessment and testing to know our students are learning. It’s like they don’t trust me anymore to do my job. I could see today that just about every single child today could group and sort based on an activity we did. But then we had to do an actual directed assessment of that skill. It’s a little crazy. What you assess, how you assess, what you can say when you assess, what you can’t say when you assess, what materials you can use, what materials you can’t use, what tone of voice to use…am I comfortable with an assessment? I’ve taken elements of things and tried to make my curriculum right by my students and for my students. I do a lot more testing now. I would probably change that. And you know what, I would know my students anyway. With or without all of these assessments. I could tell you who needs intervention and who is advanced. I know who can identify letters and sounds. I don’t need the constant testing to tell me that. I’m a teacher. I do know my students. There are just lots of ways of teaching and learning. So that is what I would change. I would take some of the emphasis off of the assessment and testing piece. I would let children learn how they learn best.

(Invariant Constituent 41B) I love to listen; one of my favorite things to do is just listen. If someone has just finished a journal page or a picture with me and
I hear things over there, like when they mimic me, “Oh, look at what you did! Great work! Now go to the Horseshoe.” I love to hear their words in dramatic play. It tells me so much. About who they are, what they are experiencing, what they know, what they love, hate, are scared of, what they are learning… You know language, they have picked up so much, like tangrams! They love that word all the time. In October I have a pumpkin full of just old, interesting stuff and they can do story mats and create these stories. The language and thought…it’s amazing. They use teacher talk. I love it. They use descriptive words and math words and concepts. I could listen all day if I had time. And I could learn a lot.

**Teacher Themes: Clustering, Thematizing, and Final Identification of the Invariant Constituents**

Steps three and four of the modification of the van Kaam method of analysis of phenomenological data require that the data be clustered and themed according to a thematic label and final identification of the invariant constituents determined. To accomplish this, the triangulating analysts carefully reviewed the invariant constituents that I had clustered into initial thematic groupings. Imaginative variation was then utilized to carefully consider and reflect on the emerging invariant horizons of the experience. The analysts then agreed upon relevant themes. The invariant constituents were validated through analysis of the complete individual transcripts. Finally, each invariant constituent and accompanying theme were reviewed to determine if they could be categorized into one of the agreed upon themes by either being expressed explicitly or
by being compatible to one of the themes (Moustakas, 1994). The identified themes are represented in Table 6.

Table 6

Themes and Descriptions of Teachers’ Lived Experience of Play in the Kindergarten Classroom

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The experience of play in the classroom</td>
<td>Centers&lt;br&gt;Hands-on learning&lt;br&gt;Socialization&lt;br&gt;Inside vs. Outside play&lt;br&gt;Time/schedule&lt;br&gt;Play as pedagogy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beliefs and Perceptions about play</td>
<td>Definition of play&lt;br&gt;Developmentally appropriate practice&lt;br&gt;Meeting student needs&lt;br&gt;Benefits of play&lt;br&gt;More play opportunities&lt;br&gt;Student-adult ratio&lt;br&gt;Reduction in standardized testing&lt;br&gt;Reduction in formal diagnostic testing&lt;br&gt;Increase informal observational assessment&lt;br&gt;Emphasis on DAP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing culture of kindergarten</td>
<td>Standards Based Instruction&lt;br&gt;Common Core State Standards&lt;br&gt;Standardized Testing&lt;br&gt;Teacher Accountability&lt;br&gt;Teacher Expectations&lt;br&gt;Student Expectations</td>
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Thematic Textural-Structural Descriptions

Thematic textural-structural descriptions were constructed for each teacher and group of students, steps five, six, and seven of the modified van Kaam method of analysis, after an additional careful review of the transcripts. This description incorporated the
previously determined invariant constituents and themes and sought to emphasize the meanings and essence of the experience of play. The textural-structural descriptions for each teacher are represented below.

**Teacher A.** Teacher A is a Caucasian female teacher with 14 total years of early childhood teaching experience. Her first four years of experience were obtained in a private setting where she worked with infants and toddlers. The following seven years, Teacher A was employed by the local Educational Service Center working as an Intervention Specialist for preschool children with special needs. The remaining three years of experience are in her current position as a kindergarten teacher in a local public school system. Teacher A holds a Bachelor’s degree in Early Childhood Primary Education from a four year accredited university and a Master’s degree in Early Childhood Intervention from the same university. Recently she completed coursework to obtain kindergarten thru 12th grade Reading Endorsement licensure. The interview was conducted in the teacher’s classroom after school on August 28, 2014 at 4:00 p.m. and lasted approximately one hour.

Play is primarily experienced in the classroom of Teacher A through teacher designed learning centers. Five learning centers occur each day, in 10 to 12 minute increments, with 5 predetermined groups of 4 children each. These groups are organized by ability level of the students and little fluctuation or change occurs in terms of group members. Teacher A states that during learning centers she has one, 10 minute play-based center every day “for them to just be who they are without all of the other expectations placed on them” and to “really give them a break from all of the academics
we place on them.” These play-based centers include block building, playdough, sensory table, and dramatic play. The remaining four centers each have an academic emphasis and are teacher directed. Examples of teacher-directed learning centers include guided reading groups, writing center, journal writing, and phonics instruction. Additionally, Teacher A utilizes approximately 20 minutes of open-ended “math tubs” during her mathematics instruction. Math tubs are “all different types of math manipulatives” that the students are able to self-select and participate in “any way they choose as long as it is appropriate” and as long as they follow a specified set of rules, including; only four students at each math tub, clean up before moving on, take only what you need, and don’t take apart anyone else’s structure. Teacher A shares that although she may add a prompt or additional materials to these math tubs, the students are not required to use them and may explore them freely. During this time, children are divided into three groups of 5-7 children each and rotate among three math stations, one of these being math tubs.

Teacher A says that she considers the 10-15 minutes of outside morning recess and 30 minutes of afternoon recess to be an important opportunity for play during the kindergarten day. She states that children are more actively engaged in higher levels of play outside on the playground. She is unsure if this is due to the restrictions placed on them in the classroom, such as lack of time, classroom rules, or limited materials. If afternoon outside recess is not an option due to inclement weather, inside recess becomes 5 to 6 play-based centers, occurring for the same 30-minute time frame. These play-based centers include opportunities to self-select games, build with blocks, use
playdough, explore the sensory table, and play in the dramatic play center. Children are not required to stay in predetermined groups or rotate to each open center.

She feels that although she incorporates an average of 60 minutes of play each day through one play-based center, indoor/outdoor recess, and math tubs, it is “not nearly enough” to meet the developmental needs of children, as the emphasis on academics is ever-present. While she occasionally embeds academics into play, Teacher A shares that she is unsure how to “make that happen” on a consistent basis, stating, “I’m sure there are ways to do that...I can’t think of a single one right now.”

Teacher A holds many personal beliefs and assumptions about play. She defines play as “providing...an environment and materials and opportunities to explore those materials so they can figure out all the different things they can do.” She believes that play should be open-ended and encourage use of their “creative mind,” while they problem-solve, collaborate and socialize with their peers. She maintains that play is “very important for children of kindergarten age and higher,” yet feels she does not provide enough opportunities for her students to engage in free play activities, as the concern of academic preparedness remains the primary focus.

She believes that changing expectations have influenced the way play is used in her classroom, stating she knows, “what is developmentally appropriate for children...and kindergarten has changed so it is not all developmentally appropriate.” While emphasizing the importance of the social aspects of play, she is quick to point out that within this changing framework she knows she must meet the developmental needs of children while still doing what she “needs to do” to meet the academic goals of
kindergarten, a challenging, if not impossible task. She states that if she could “just have a play-based kindergarten where they could work on those missing social pieces, I wouldn’t be nearly as concerned for them.” The increased emphasis on academics has shifted the focus of instruction in her classroom and she finds this concerning. In her classroom, play often loses emphasis as “kindergarten is an incredibly important year to develop some of those basic (academic) skills to be able to be successful later.” Teacher A admits that she worries more now about meeting the needs of her children than in year’s past and often wonders, “How am I going to meet their needs? How am I going to give them what they need to be successful?” While she inherently believes play to be important, she admits that in kindergarten, it is becoming a luxury neither she nor her students have time for.

The changing culture of kindergarten has had a significant impact on the ways in which Teacher A views kindergarten and the way children experience play in her classroom. This changing culture has led to increased expectations and pressure for students as Teacher A maintains, “Kindergarten isn’t what it used to be. It seems that we are doing more 1st grade work now.” She further elaborates on this change by stating, “Kindergarten used to be that you come and you interact with other children and you have play-based centers and you learn your alphabet and your colors, those kinds of things. Now, things are shifting in such a way that those are the things they are doing in preschool and the things they used to do in 1st grade, like learning to read and write and add and subtract are now in kindergarten and things just continue to get shoved down.”
She attributes this change in student expectation, in part, to a push for American children to perform better than students from other countries on standardized measures of achievement, citing developmentally inappropriate state-mandated standardized tests, such as the 3rd Grade Reading Guarantee and the KRA (Kindergarten Readiness Assessment) as examples of such measures. Formal diagnostic testing, as required by her school system, such as DIBELS and short-cycle assessments in each content area, compound the negative impact of testing as she spends a large portion of her time testing and evaluating children using these standardized and mandatory measures. Though she tries to not let all of the emphasis on testing influence her teaching, she admits it is difficult; “I know what is appropriate for my students, however, I am required to do all of these assessments with my students, and it does take away from what I can actually do in my classroom.”

Teacher A is quick to share that although many feel that the recently adopted Common Core State Standards have placed unrealistic expectations on both teachers and students, she does not see it as the root of the problem. She states, “I don’t think Common Core is the real issue…it has gotten looped into this whole testing issue so it is perceived negatively.” While she does not necessarily perceive the Common Core State Standards as a problem, Teacher A still views them as “frustrating” and simply “one more change” to which teachers and students must accommodate. The issue, she says, is testing; “having to show all of this progress…the emphasis on data and numbers.”

Ultimately, Teacher A feels it is the students who suffer the most in this changing culture of testing and accountability, stating, “I think all of those things have applied
pressure and expectations on children and whether it is developmentally appropriate or not is not taken into consideration.” She goes on to express frustration that the academic expectations placed on her students combined with the increased expectations and pressure placed on her through the new Ohio Teacher Evaluation System, limit what she can do in the classroom, stating, “I try to incorporate as much play as I can into my classroom…but right now, knowing all the expectations we have in kindergarten, for my students and myself, I know it is going to be a struggle.”

Teacher A would like to see a number of changes implemented in kindergarten. Ultimately, she says, “I just want it to be developmentally appropriate.” To accomplish this, she feels a change must occur in regard to the constant cycle of testing and assessment that is currently occurring in her classroom. This testing consistently pulls her away from her students and classroom guidance and instruction, and places inappropriate expectations on both students and teacher. She says that a reduction in testing would allow for more “time” that could be used to implement developmentally appropriate practices, such as play-based centers, fostering appropriate social-emotional domains so that students can become successful members of the classroom community and implementing authentic assessments. She says, “I would actually have a better understanding of what they are able to do in place of these assessments. I would be able to sit and watch. To really observe…listen to what they are saying.” She goes on to say that “I wouldn’t be asking them to perform. It would be them being authentic.”

Additionally, she would advocate for smaller teacher-student ratios. She feels a smaller class size and the utilization of a full time teacher’s aide would allow for more
developmentally appropriate experiences for her students and ultimately, increase student achievement.
Figure 1: Thematic textural-structural representation of teacher A's experience with play in the kindergarten classroom

Experience of Play in the Classroom

- Directed learning centers
  - Math tubs
- 30 minutes a day (inside, classroom)
- 30 minutes a day (outside)
- Inside/Outside recess
- Teacher-directed learning centers

Play as a break from academics

- Structured
- Break from academics

Changing Culture of Kindergarten

- Kindergarten as new first grade
- Increased academic expectations for students
- Increased expectations for teachers
- Standardized measure of accountability: Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA)
- Ohio Teachers Evaluation System (OTES)
- Short-cycle Assessments
- DIBELS
- 3rd Grade Reading Guarantee

Beliefs and Perceptions About Play

- Open-ended and creative
- Developmentally appropriate
- Important, yet limited
- Worry: Academic focus hinders play opportunities
- Socialization
- Academic focus hinders play opportunities

Innovative, yet limited
Teacher B. Teacher B is a Caucasian female teacher with more than thirty years of early childhood teaching experience. Her first six years of experience were as a preschool teacher in a YMCA, followed by one year of teaching first grade in a public school system. For the past twenty-three years, including the current 2014-2015 school year, Teacher B has been teaching kindergarten in a local public school system. Though she officially retired at the end of the last academic year, she was able to ‘retire-rehire’ and return to the same kindergarten teaching position. She has no current plans to permanently retire and presumes she has many years of teaching left. Teacher B holds a Bachelors degree in Elementary Education from a four-year accredited university and a Master’s Degree in Reading from the same university. The interview was conducted in the teacher’s classroom after school on September 3, 2014 at 4:00 p.m. and lasted approximately two hours.

Play is experienced in a multitude of ways each day in Classroom B as Teacher B embeds play in all aspects of the school day; “Well, there are elements of play in a lot (of our day)...(t)here are just so many things we can talk about and learn through play.” The day begins with “Work and Play,” a time that begins as soon as the children arrive at school. According to Teacher B, Work and Play is a time when “children can go play wherever they want…every center is open to them.” These centers include: playdough, listening center, housekeeping, blocks, reading center (in a claw-footed bathtub), manipulatives, sensory table, science, easel, writing center, post office, puppet theater, doll house, computer, and large legos. This block of time, lasting up to the first hour and a half of the school day, affords students the opportunity to make open-ended and
independent decisions about not only what they will play, but how they will play, as well. Teacher B shares, “You can be a puppy and someone can lead you around…and you can talk about your own pets and it just opens up a lot of conversation with young children.” Center materials are not confined to a specific area and may be taken to other parts of the room. Teacher B states, “kindergarten is not drudgery…you don’t have to rotate center to center.” She goes on to share that during Work and Play time there are “high expectations” placed on children, as they are “called over to work on something independently or with a small group…so we get a lot done.” Teacher B, a full-time teacher’s aide, and numerous volunteers work with the children during Work and Play time, completing a variety of activities that include “a whole gamut of things,” like writing, reading, or other special projects, such as completing a class mural or class book. Teacher B states, “They know to stop and come over, but they also know they can return to their play when they are done.” She stresses the importance of Work and Play in her classroom, “I will not give up Work and Play time. That is too important of a time, when children can still be five years old.” She further elaborates, “It’s not just a special time on Friday’s to play, but an important part of my curriculum.”

Teacher B infuses play into other parts of her day, as well. She considers Morning Meeting and Circle times, lasting approximately 20 minutes a day, play-based as children are actively engaged in greetings and activities. “I like to think that there is play in Morning Meeting. I’m not lecturing them.” Literacy Centers, an hour and 15-minute block of time each day when the class focuses on literacy-based activities, such as guided reading groups, literacy games and activities, and literacy-based centers like the
post office and listening center, also incorporate play in learning. Students rotate in seven groups of three children each through a variety of developmentally appropriate literacy and play-based experiences. Teacher B states, “When they come to me for guided reading, a lot of teachers wouldn’t consider that play time, but I build play into everything…the play is always there.” While Teacher B is “pretty happy” with her Literacy Centers, she admits that she had to give up her morning recess to make it work in the daily schedule. “I feel less guilty” (about losing the recess) because the Literacy Centers encourage movement, play, and communication; “I think they are meaningful…you don’t have to sit in a chair at a table all of the time.” While Teacher B is not one to focus on “paper and pencil” tasks, she is quick to point out that she does have a responsibility to ensure that her students are exposed to them occasionally, “I would not be their friend if I kept them from that type of learning. They would be at a disadvantage going into first grade if they didn’t have some of that nitty-gritty. But, they also have plenty of time to play.”

After lunch, children get a “solid half hour” of outdoor recess, though Teacher B admits that sometimes, “I may push it longer.” Socialization is an important part of outdoor recess as a rule in Teacher B’s classroom is, “You can’t say you can’t play with us.” She goes on to share that the students all play together well on the playground, “They chase and run and put each other in jail and everyone is involved.” While she used to have three outdoor recesses scheduled throughout her day, she is no longer able to accommodate that in the schedule.
Mathematics, Language Arts, Social Studies and Science instruction is also embedded in play through the use of Work Jobs and Math Tubs. Work Jobs, lasting approximately one hour each day, allow the students to participate in a variety of both student and teacher led activities. During this time, students are divided into three groups and complete three rotations, each lasting approximately 20 minutes: Work Jobs, Teacher-led learning activities, and Rainbow Centers. In addition to fostering personal responsibility, as children are responsible for getting their work ready, setting it up, completing it, having it checked, and putting it away, Work Jobs facilitate learning in all domains through hands-on “learning activities, little games” that engage the children in meaningful ways. Activities include lacing cards, rhyming games, matching activities, floor puzzles, working with numbers and letters, and counting games, and are always related to the current classroom theme. Teacher B maintains, “Everything is created for them, so they are doing it in a five year old frame.” Teacher-led learning activities give Teacher B the opportunity to work with small groups of students on specific skills and activities, which can include conducting science experiments or participating in a game such as Boggle or Shake and Spill a sight word. The final rotation during Work Job time is Rainbow Centers. Rainbow Centers are predetermined play-centers that students are not able to self-select, as they are predetermined by Teacher B, and change often. She organizes the play centers in this way to “encourage children to try different things, things they might not otherwise try.” Learning is evident in all facets of Work Job time, “but they are still playing and getting that time in.”
Math Tubs, utilized for approximately 30 minutes a day, are tubs of math manipulatives that students are able to self-select and use to work on math concepts. Eight tubs, with enough materials in each for four students, encourage children to participate and explore at their individual level of ability, “If a student needs challenged, they can be challenged. If they need some remediation or intervention, they can be successful at whatever level they are at.” Unifix cubes, pattern blocks, nuts, dominoes, and small plastic animals are examples of the open-ended materials contained in the tubs. Teacher B considers Math Tubs to be another play-based opportunity for learning in her classroom, “Yes, they are learning math through play. They are still guiding their own learning.”

Of the six hours and 30 minutes of a typical school day, Teacher B embeds play into nearly 4 hours and 45 minutes of instructional time. The remaining time in the day is allotted for lunch and specials, such as physical education, art, and music. She is adamant that “I know I am doing what is best for kindergarteners. I don’t have to question myself anymore.” She further states, “They leave me prepared.”

Teacher B holds many strong beliefs and perceptions about play. She defines play as “fun” and freely chosen by the student. She believes that play is an activity that is self-directed and requires children to work together, cooperate, and use their imagination, a skill she sees children using less and less. “Let’s be honest,” she says, “Kindergarteners work is play. And play is work.”

An increased focus on academics has led many of her peers and pre-service teachers from a local university with whom she has contact to believe that there isn’t
enough time for play in the kindergarten curriculum, an extremely troubling concept for her. She says, “They say they don’t have time, that there is too much work to be done and I just think, Oh my! When do their brains rest? When are they just five?” For her, however, she feels like she must “preserve that element of play. I know it is worthwhile. I know they learn a lot through play.” While Teacher B understands the increased expectations placed on both teachers and students, she believes that play does not have to be sacrificed as a result. “You can use play…to meet a lot of the required ‘have-to’s’ of your curriculum.” Her fear is that many teachers were either never taught how to use play or simply have not figured out how to do it effectively. “It’s as though play (is) a four-letter word to them.”

Teacher B believes that children “learn a lot through play…things you don’t even think about.” In addition to embedding play into nearly every element of her school day to enhance academic learning, Teacher B believes that the value of play for other types of learning is tremendous and invaluable for kindergarten children. She maintains that through play, social skills are enhanced, a sense of responsibility is fostered, cooperation and teamwork are utilized, communication is enriched, and problem-solving and critical thinking skills are refined. Additionally, she believes that through play children are learning to be respectful of each other and classroom materials, something she says, “we forget about or take for granted.”

Ultimately, Teacher B believes that kindergarten is the most important year of schooling for every child, “it brings me back to thinking about building a home…about needing a sturdy foundation; kindergarten is that foundation.” She maintains that to be
successful, children need a “solid start” and they need to “love learning.” She says she is discouraged and upset when she hears about schools that take away recess in place of academics or have “students sitting at desks, working in workbooks.” She says, “I can’t even take it. It is the most inappropriate thing I have ever heard.” She feels that she has an obligation to ensure that school is a happy place, a fun place, a place where students want to come, and creating a strong culture of play in her classroom is one way that she does that. And, she says, “it is what’s right for kids.”

The culture of kindergarten has changed significantly since Teacher B started her career in early childhood education. When she first began teaching kindergarten the emphasis was almost solely on developmentally appropriate practice and play. “We did academic things,” she says, “but it was big on socialization.” She says that through the years she has observed the focus on play diminish and an increased importance placed on structure to “get in academics and all of the domains.” The single biggest change she has witnessed, however, is the requirement for a significant increase in testing and assessment. “Angst” is how she describes her feelings about the increase in testing, and whether she is meeting the needs of her students as a result. She says, “When do I have time to test them on all of these things that I have to test them on… (I feel) that I should be testing them and maybe not doing something else.”

An increase in what is expected of students is also a significant change in the kindergarten culture. “I do believe kindergarten is the new first grade,” she shares. She says that after spending so many years teaching kindergarten and knowing what the expectation used to be, she is often surprised and saddened by the current level of
expectation now; “I still find it incredible that we are asking kindergarteners to do some of these things.” The expectations, however, have not just increased for students. “It’s more and more and more put on…teachers,” she says. She cites an increase in state and local assessments that she is required to administer. She feels the higher demands placed on her time by these requirements decrease the time she is able to participate in meaningful work with her students. She believes that there is more pressure on teachers, “especially kindergarten teachers,” as students are expected to be able to read, write, add and subtract by the end of kindergarten, as well as show growth on a myriad of standardized measures. While she isn’t sure whether Common Core State Standards are to blame for the increase in testing and expectations, she says that she has “been through it all,” from standards based education to No Child Left Behind, even new text book series. She believes, though, that she is “lucky” because through the years she has had the opportunity to figure out what is useful and what is not and therefore, she doesn’t question herself anymore about doing what she believes is right for children.

“Everything is changing,” she believes, “but not everything for the better.” Though change in inevitable, Teacher B simply “tr(ies) to make it work for a five year old brain.”

Changes are needed in kindergarten, according to Teacher B. Paramount among these is a change in the constant testing and assessment that is required in kindergarten. She feels this is the single biggest issue facing kindergarten teachers and children today. “The volume of assessing we have to do is insane,” she says, “That’s a lot of pressure and it’s frustrating.” Ultimately, she does not believe that all of the assessment and testing she is required to do helps her to know her students better, “I don’t think I need to be
doing all of this assessment and testing to know our students are learning. It’s like they don’t trust me anymore to do my job.” She continues, “I do a lot more testing now. I would probably change that. And you know what? I would know my students anyway, with or without all of these assessments. I’m a teacher. I do know my students.” If a de-emphasis on testing and assessment were to occur, she would like to see a return to developmentally appropriate practice in kindergarten classrooms so that students could “learn how they learn best.” Ultimately, she says, “I want to do justice by my students; I want them to be happy. I want them to like school. It is incredibly important to me that they like school.”
Figure 2: Theoretical textual-structural representation of teacher B’s experience with play in the kindergarten classroom

- Less Structured/Ended
- 30 minutes a day/averge (outside)
- 4 hours 45 minutes a day/average

Work and Play Time
- Work Jobs: Outside recess
- Morning Meeting; Library Centers
- Work and Play Time
- Embedded in all aspects of day

Experience of Play in the Classroom

Beliefs and perceptions about play

- Academic focus enhanced by play opportunities
- Socialization
- Open-ended and creative
- Critical for student success
- Worry
- Decrease emphasis on standardized testing and formal
- Kindergarten as new first grade
- Less emphasis on Developmentally Appropriate Practice
- Increased academic expectations for students
- Increased academic expectations for teachers
- Practice
- Kindergarten culture of kindergarten

Critical for student success
- Open-ended and creative
- Socialization
- Academic focus enhanced by play opportunities

- Less Structured/Ended
- 30 minutes a day/average (outside)
- 4 hours 45 minutes a day/average

Work and Play Time
- Work Jobs: Outside recess
- Morning Meeting; Library Centers
- Work and Play Time
- Embedded in all aspects of day
Composite Thematic Textural-Structural Descriptions: Teachers

The final level of analysis of the teacher interview data, as per the modified van Kaam method of analysis, was to complete a composite description of the teachers’ experiences with play in the kindergarten classroom. This composite thematic textural-structural description represents the teachers as a group, focusing on the meanings and essence of their combined lived experiences. The composite thematic textural-structural description of the teacher data is presented below.

The experience of play in the classrooms of Teacher A and Teacher B can be perceived as being vastly different from one another. Teacher A believes that she incorporates a total of approximately 60 minutes of both inside and outside, structured and unstructured play in her classroom. This play is experienced through teacher-directed learning centers, math tubs, and outdoor recess. Teacher A views play as a “break” from the academic expectations placed on students. Conversely, Teacher B maintains that she incorporates approximately five hours and fifteen minutes of play, or her entire instructional day, into her typical school day. Play in Classroom B is experienced through less structured open-ended play opportunities in all areas of classroom instruction, including, work and play time, morning meeting, literacy centers, math tubs, work jobs, and outside recess. Teacher B considers play to be an imperative pedagogy in her classroom, citing it as the most important way that children learn.

Teacher A and Teacher B hold many of the same beliefs and perceptions about play. Both teachers believe that play is an experience that is open-ended, promotes creative expression and thought, and is a critical component in the socialization of
children. While both teachers believe that play is vitally important for young children, Teacher A feels that she is limited in the opportunities she is able to provide play to her students, as the focus on academic preparedness hinders the time she is able to devote to play-based learning. Teacher B believes that not only can play can be utilized to enhance the academic focus in kindergarten, but that it is the true foundation for all learning for young children. Both teachers have concerns about providing developmentally appropriate play opportunities for children, however, Teacher B maintains that play is critical for student success and not something she is willing to sacrifice.

Teacher A and Teacher B hold many of same views as they relate to the changing culture of kindergarten and how that affects play in their respective classrooms. Both teachers believe that the push down of academic expectations from subsequent grades has turned kindergarten into the “new first grade,” with increased and often inappropriate expectations placed on both students and teachers. Standardized measures of accountability, such as the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment and short-cycle in-classroom assessments, have further added to the shift in the culture of kindergarten. Both teachers are of the opinion that the emphasis on standardized methods of assessment has reduced the time they can spend on authentic, meaningful learning, and in its place, this time is now spent conducting assessments that provide less meaningful feedback and information about their students. While both teachers express frustration, worry, and angst over this shift in culture, Teacher B remains steadfast in her beliefs about play as pedagogy and Teacher A believes opportunities to play are lost as her focus has become about preparing her students for future academic success.
Teacher A and Teacher B agree that a number of changes would enhance the experience of play in kindergarten. Both teachers cite a return to developmentally appropriate practice, with emphasis on play-based and authentic instruction and learning and a de-emphasis on standardized testing and formal assessment as not only the most important proposed changes, but ones that would elicit the greatest positive impact for students. Teacher A goes on to say that she feels that an increased emphasis on authentic assessment and a lower student-teacher ratio would also increase positive outcomes for children.
Figure 3: Composite representation of teachers' experience with play in the kindergarten classroom.

Beliefs and Perceptions

Classroom Experience of Play in the Kindergarten

Changing Culture of Kindergarten

About Play
Horizinalization of Student Data: Listing and Preliminary Grouping

Student data was analyzed using the modification of the van Kaam method of analysis of phenomenological data. Following the exact protocol as used previously with teacher interview data, the process of horizinalization of the data was conducted through a review of the verbatim interview transcripts of the kindergarten students. The study’s triangulating analysts, including the researcher, peer debriefer, and community of practice member, continued to hold regular meetings to ensure credibility measures were being taken and to validate the process of data analysis. Epoche continued to be utilized with each reading of the transcripts and the subsequent reflection period that followed. The list that remained became the horizons of the students’ experience of play.

Invariant Constituents: Reduction and Elimination

The invariant constituents from the student data were organized from each transcript and clustered by emerging thematic groupings. As with the teacher data, overlapping and repetitive statements were eliminated, as were any distracting phrases and extraneous data. The following are the invariant constituents, as taken from the verbatim responses of each student participant.

1. What does it mean to play?:

Students; Classroom A:

(Interview 1; Block area)

(Invariant Constituent 1SA)

AG: Can you tell me what it means to play?
S9A: Play means having fun. Like if you see some toys you can explore them and that is called play.

(Interview 1: Block area)

(Invariant Constituent 2SA)

AG: What is play?

S16A: It is where you line up and go outside to the big playground.

(Interview 7; Math Tubs)

(Invariant Constituent 3SA)

S3A: It means you can play with the things you want to play with. But only if your mom and dad say it is okay. And if you really, really like it.

(Interview 7; Math Tubs)

(Invariant Constituent 4SA)

S4A: You get to play with toys and stuff.

(Interview 7; Math Tubs)

(Invariant Constituent 5SA)

S13A: It (play) means that you can have time with your friends and playing together and getting exercise and stuff.

(Interview 21; Math Tubs)

(Invariant Constituent 6SA)

AG: Okay, I’ll take a picture when you are done. S8A, do you think you are good at playing?
S8A: No.

AG: No?

S8A: No, I just make up new things.

AG: You make up new things? Are you good at making up those new things?

S8A: Yes. Pretty good.

**Students; Classroom B:**

(Interview 1B; On the carpet in the block area with dramatic play materials)

(Invariant Constituent 1SB)

AG: What does it mean to play?

S20B: Uhhh, it means you get stuff out and you use it. And you use it for something or you make something and we make-believe stuff and we play that kind of stuff too. Stuff that is pretend. But it is real sometimes.

AG: I see. Do you like to play?

S20B: Oh yeah. (she starts singing)

AG: I like to play, too. Why do you like to play?

S20B: Mrs. Gibbs? Hold on a minute. I’m getting a call. She’s trying to call me and I can’t talk to you and answer the phone. (takes play phone out of her purse, answers it)

AG: Of course.

S20B: (into phone) Uh-huh. Really? Why? I don’t want to do that. Hi, teacher. What did you need to tell me?
S12B: (on other phone) Hi. Listen. Don’t open up your house or a flood will come get you cause our magic is full.

S20B: Yeah, yeah, teacher. I have heard about that. My father can do it and you know what he is?

S12B: What?

S20B: He is a sorcerer in the show of all games.

S12B: WHAT??!!?

S20B: Yup. He’s in a magic show last night and he won the championship ribbon. He won and you lost, I hope.

S12B: Are we allowed to have our shoes off?

S20B: Teacher, I don’t need to talk about this anymore. It’s crazy. I need to go to my teacher’s office.

(Interview 1B; On the carpet in block area with dramatic play materials)

(Invariant Constituent 2SB)

AG: I would love it if you talked to me now. What does it mean to play?

S8B: It means that you have fun. And you get stuff out.

AG: What kinds of stuff might you get out.

S8B: Baby dolls, food, blocks.

AG: Do you like to play?

S8B: Yes, of course.

AG: Why do you like to play?
S8B: Well, I like to play at school but I don’t really have anyone to play with at home. There isn’t anyone.

AG: So you like to play with friends at school? There are a lot of new friends here, aren’t there?

S8B: I have a whole family at home. And I still don’t have anyone to play with. I can’t play with anybody. Cause normally my dad is sleeping when I come home from school and my mom is teaching girl scouts with Annabell.

AG: Yeah? Do you get to play at school?

S8B: Yeah.

(Interview 2B; On the carpet in block area with dramatic play materials)

AG: Oh my. I see. SB12, what does it mean to play?

S12B: Ummm, you play with toys. And remember to put them back.

AG: Oh, yes. That sounds like one of the rules you have at school. How do you know if you are playing at school?

S12B: Because it’s my favorite, you know. (She walks away and then returns)

(Interview 2B; On the carpet in block area with dramatic play materials)

AG: Would you like to tell me anything else about play?

S6B: I just like to play. Not really talk about it.

(Interview 3B; On the carpet in block area with dramatic play materials)
AG: Can you tell me what you think play is?

AG: (shrugs) What if you were talking to a new kindergarten student who had never ever played before, what would you tell them about what play is?

S7B: I would say, “You can play with me. I can show you.” And I could teach her how to play.

AG: You would teach her how to play? That is so nice. What would you teach her?

S7B: I’d have her follow me. And see things. I’d show her my little ponies.

AG: Are my little ponies your favorite thing to play at school? I like my little ponies, too.

(Interview 3B; On the carpet in block area with dramatic play materials)

(Invariant Constituent 6SB)

AG: S14B, if a friend came to kindergarten and didn’t know what play was, what would you tell them? What does it mean to play?

S14B: It means you are having a lot of fun and you are really going to like kindergarten.

AG: What do you think S3B?

S3B: I painted my nails purple. You can tell somebody that there is good stuff about play.

AG: OH! What is good about play? Can you tell me?

S3B: Be nice to others. Be safe in the classroom. And don’t get hurt. And don’t run in the classroom.
AG: It sounds like you know a lot of rules about play. Those sound like rules that will keep us safe, don’t they? What kinds of things would you tell someone they could play in kindergarten?

S7B: Blocks. And if they fall down, it’s okay. Just build it again.

AG: That’s good advice. If it falls, just build it again. What else can you play in kindergarten?

S7B: No hitting.

AG: That is a good safety rule.

S7B: S14B is fake crying.

AG: I hear that.

S14B: I’m not crying. I’m spinning.

2. How do you know if you are playing?:

Students; Classroom A:

(Interview 1A; Block Center)

(Invariant Constituent 7SA)

AG: Oh, I see. Do you get to play in kindergarten?

S9A: Yes. You do get to play in kindergarten.

AG: What is your favorite thing to play in kindergarten?

S9A: Batman.

AG: And where do you get to play Batman?

S9A: Dramatic Play cause there is a really big football jersey and it looks like wings. I put it near my armpits and I pretend it is batman.
AG: That is very clever. What else do you like to play at school?

S9A: Building tall towers. I am playing that right now. See? A tall tower!

AG: I see. You are using a lot of blocks. How do you know if you are playing?

S9A: If you see someone having fun you are seeing them play.

(Interview 3A; Dramatic Play Center)

(Invariant Constituent 8SA)

AG: Huh. How do you know if something is play?

S13A: By doing it.

(Interview 7A; Math Tubs)

(Invariant Constituent 9SA)

S13A: Playing is fun.

(Interview 9A; Dramatic Play Center)

(Invariant Constituent 10SA)

AG: What kinds of things do you think are play?

S15A: If there is a toy it is play. Like, let me show you. (He goes to dramatic play and starts collecting toys). Like this is a phone. It’s a toy phone. It was real but now it doesn’t work. And here I have a real cup with real metal. Feel it. That’s real metal. This is real metal, too. Metal pans.

(Interview 9A; Dramatic Play Center)

(Invariant Constituent 11SA)

AG: S5A, how do you know if you are playing?

S5A: I’m having fun. And I decided to play this.
AG: So you are playing when you have fun and when you decide what to do?
S5A: Pretty much.

(Interview 10A; Carpet Area)

(Intvariant Constituent 12SA)

AG: Can you tell me something you do when you have fun?
S9A: Have fun.

(Interview 13A; Block Center)

(Intvariant Constituent 13SA)

AG: S8A, how do you know if you are playing?
S8A: Well, you might do something with someone else.

AG: When you do something with someone else you are playing?
S8A: Yes. Or playing a game.

(Interview 13A; Block Center)

(Intvariant Constituent 14SA)

S11A: Mrs. Gibbs, you don’t want to miss this! Watch!
AG: You are right. I don’t want to miss that. You are balancing.
S11A: Yes, it can balance cause it’s on a hard surface and when I put something on the top it might knock over. On this it is harder to knock over because it is on a hard surface. It will work better.
AG: It will balance better on a hard surface?
S11A: Yes. A hard surface. The base needs to be secure on a hard surface. The base of it is the bottom.
AG: Ohhh. Since you are on the carpet you will have to make a hard base?

S11A: Yes. I will have to make my own base.

AG: So, Eliot, is this work or is this play?

S11A: This is play.

AG: How do you know?

S11A: I decided what to build. I am making the blocks high like this.

(Interview 17A; Block Center)

AG: S5A, when you are in the block area are you working or are you playing?

I: Playing.

AG: How do you know you are playing?

S5A: Cause you get to get out all of these blocks and build whatever you want.

S14A: That is a big birthday cake!

S5A: I decided what to build!

(Interview 18A; Block Center)

(Invariant Constituent 15SA)

AG: This is a very interesting boat. Are you working or playing right now?


AG: Is there a difference?

S12A: Not today.

Students; Classroom B:

(Interview 2B; On the carpet in the block area with dramatic play materials)

(Invariant Constituent 7SB)
AG: Can you tell me what it means to play? How do you know if you are playing?

S6B: Well, you just know.

AG: You just know?

S6B: Yes. You just know in your mind if you are playing.

AG: You just know in your mind. That makes a lot of sense to me. Do you do any work at school?

SB6: Yes.

(Interview 3B; On the carpet in the block area with dramatic play materials)

(Intvariant Constituent 8SB)

AG: How do you know if what you are doing is playing?

S7B: Well, You can walk around with your babies.

AG: Does Teacher B decide what you get to play?

S7B: No. We decided for ourselves.

AG: How do you decide what to play?

S7B: You can just see what you want to play.

AG: So, you just look around the room and decide what you would like to play?

S7B: (nods yes)

(Interview 5B; Carpet Area)

(Intvariant Constituent 9SB)

S13B: What’s nice is you can pick whatever you want to do and that is what I do. I pick whatever I want to. Sometimes I just want to sit around. It’s my choice.
AG: S13B, do you think you are good at playing?

S13B: Oh, yes.

AG: How do you know?

S13B: Well, there is just no wrong way to play.

AG: Ooohhh, there is no wrong way to play. That is very interesting. Can you learn anything when you play?

S13B: No.

AG: What kind of things do you like to play at school?

S13B: Well, it really just depends on what I want to choose. And stuff I feel like playing or that I don’t feel like playing.

AG: So, you get to make those decisions? About what you play? So, if you want to play with blocks at school…

S13B: Then I play with blocks.

AG: And if you don’t feel like playing with blocks…

S13B: Then I don’t need to do it.

AG: So, you could choose something else?

S13B: Yes.
(Invariant Constituent 12SB)

S16B: Because it is fun.

3. What/When/How do you play in kindergarten?

Students; Classroom A:

(Interview 1A; Block Center)

(Invariant Constituent 16SA)

AG: Oh, I see. Do you get to play in kindergarten?

S9A: Yes. You do get to play in kindergarten.

AG: What is your favorite thing to play in kindergarten?

S9A: Batman.

AG: And where do you get to play Batman?

S9A: Dramatic Play cause there is a really big football jersey and it looks like wings. I put it near my armpits and I pretend it is batman.

AG: That is very clever. What else do you like to play at school?

S9A: Building tall towers. I am playing that right now. See? Tall tower!

(Interview 1A; Block Center)

(Invariant Constituent 17SA)

AG: What kinds of things do you play?

S9A: You can play Candy Land and look at shells and play with blocks and build some towers and write or draw some pictures.

(Interview 1A; Block Center)

(Invariant Constituent 18SA)
AG: Do you get to play in kindergarten?

S16A: Yes! We play together. Like S9A and me. (laughs)

AG: S9A is your friend. What do you play with S9A?

S16A: I wear the Spiderman shirt, too. We play with blocks. And a spider home block.

(Interview 1A; Block Center)

(Invariant Constituent 19SA)

AG: What kinds of things do you play inside at school?

S16A: Writing center and playdough and anything.

(Interview 1A; Block Center)

(Invariant Constituent 20SA)

S16A: You can play with blocks, go to writing center, change things. Play with the kitchen and stuff on this shelf (more blocks).

(Interview 2; Dramatic Play Center)

(Invariant Constituent 21SA)

AG: S2A, can you tell me about what you are doing?

S2A: (in a baby voice) I am a baby and she is the mommy. And he is dad and he is a dad.

AG: So, you are a baby and S16A is a mommy and S1A is a dad and S9A is a dad. I see.

S1A: Yeah, and the two dads have phones.

AG: The two dads have phones.
S16A: And the mom has a medal. She wonned.

S1A: I have a phone. I have a phone. What’s up?

S16A: I got it at the store.

S9A: I found something really cool on my phone.

AG: That is cool. Can you tell me about that?

S9A: It’s a racecar. Like a racecar that can do anything. Or fly or drive on a road.

S2A: Baby want chocolate cake.

S16A: I’m giving the baby chocolate cake. It’s he’s birthday.

AG: How old is your baby today?

S16A: Him’s five. It’s his birthday!

AG: He’s five years old today! Happy Birthday!

S1A: I’m five, too. I’m the dad. I’m having a birthday, too.

AG: It’s your birthday, too? Happy Birthday!

S16A: The baby is one and the dad is four. He’s turning five. But now he is turning to five now.

S1A: I AM FIVE (getting upset). I’m not four. I’m five. I’m a big kid. I play video games.

S16A: Five is a little number. He’s birthday is now.

S9A: I had a birthday, too.

S16A: That dad had a birthday yesterday. He is 17 now.

AG: 17?
S16A: Yes. He is 17 today.

S9A: Yeah, I’m a teenager. A teenage dad.

S2A: I’m one. (in baby voice)

S9A: I’m a teenager and have a video game on my phone.

S2A: In real life I have a baby brother and he is one. He can talk and he is one.

WAAAAAAH.

S9A: This is a weirdo phone.

AG: What makes it a weirdo phone?

S9A: It’s like you are on the news, “Reporting live!” It’s like one of those things that you can talk through.

(Interview 3A; Dramatic Play Center)

(Invariant Constituent 22SA)

AG: S13A, how is kindergarten going?

S13A: Oh my gosh, it is going great!

AG: It is? What do you like best?

S13A: I like everything. I really like the guided discoveries.

AG: Can you tell me about guided discoveries?

S13A: We learn about new toys. And we learn how to use the new toys and how to take care of them. And then we get to use them for awhile.

AG: So, S13A, is that work or is it play?

S13A: It is play.

(Interview 3A; Dramatic Play Center)
AG: DO you get to play at school?
S14A: Yes.
AG: What do you play?
S14A: We can build with blocks and other stuff. We play with toys.

AG: Is Dramatic Play work or play?
S15A: Work and play.

AG: Group 4. I’m with S7A, S3A, S11A, and S10A. What are we doing over here today?
S11A: Playing.
S3A: Babies.
S11A: Someone spilled the supper. It is all messed up.
AG: I see someone spilled the supper.
S11A: It is all messed up.
S10A: I am going to eat my supper.

S4A: I play blocks and we do dramatic play…
AG: S3A, do you get to play at school?
S3A: Yes, at recess.
AG: What do you play at recess?
S3A: I play with S4A on the tire swing at recess.
S4A: I like to play on the tire swing and also hide and seek.

(Interview 7A; Math Tubs)

AG: What do you play at school?
S4A: Like, tag.
AG: Anything in the classroom?
S4A: Blocks, and I also want to play with my friends. Sometime my friend doesn’t include everyone and that is sad.
AG: What about you, S3A? What do you play at school?
S3A: I play with Sam and he doesn’t go to this school. They go to (another elementary school) and they are not in kindergarten.
AG: Do you play in the classroom?
S3A: Actually, we don’t play in the classroom.

(Interview 8A; Playdough Center)

AG: Do you get to play in kindergarten? What do you play?
S8A: Umm, yeah. I’m playing right now. This is playdough. This is playing.

AG: I see. When you are at the playdough center you are playing. I notice there are other centers open, like the writing center. Do you get to play in the writing center?

S6A: Well, we write and play. We have to do words over there.

S8A: Yes, we do words over there. And draw.

(Interview 8A; Playdough Center)

(Invariant Constituent 29SA)

AG: S19A, do you get to play in kindergarten?

S19A: I play on the big and little playground.

AG: What do you like to play outside?

S19A: Swing and slide.

AG: Do you get to play in the classroom? What do you get to play?

S19A: Playdough and… (shrugs)

(Interview 8A; Playdough Center)

(Invariant Constituent 30SA)

S6A: I play in dramatic play.

AG: I like dramatic play, too. How do you know if you are playing?

S6A: You just are.

(Interview 9A; Dramatic Play Center)

(Invariant Constituent 31SA)

S15A: My favorite thing to play is …this right here.
AG: Dramatic play?

S15A: Yeah. Cause look at this metal. It is amazing. I have actually never seen real metal like this in a little pot. I think this could be a real pot just little. It is real metal.

AG: It is very interesting.

S15A: They are big like real ones but they are actual metal. These are just plastic. But these are real spoons.

(Interview 9A; Dramatic Play Center)

(Invariant Constituent 32SA)

S5A: I am making some overcooked meatballs. We shouldn’t eat them.

AG: S4A, do you get to play in kindergarten?

S4A: I played a lot in preschool. There are not any baby dolls here. I need a baby.

AG: What else have you played in kindergarten?

S5A: Games, I play games.

AG: What kind of games do you play?

S5A: Just Lord of the Rings.

AG: Oh, Lord of the Rings. I have never played that before. Do you play that at school?

S5A: I play it at my house. I played cupcake game. And Candy Land. I played that at school. And also Monopoly. I haven’t played that at school.

(Interview S12A; Block Center)
AG: I notice you two are working together. How did you decide what to build?

S8A: We just decided and it keeps falling down.

AG: It keeps falling down? Oh my goodness. Look at that balance.

S6A: (laughs)

S8A: It just keeps doing that.

AG: Iris, is what you are doing now work or is this play?

S8A: It’s play. Look at what we are doing.

AG: Tell me about what you are doing.

S6A: We are playing with the blocks.

S8A: This is play. Hey, S6A. Copy me. Do this. If you make another one here and then put one on top it will be a really big drive-through. See?

S6A: Like this? Right here?

AG: So, S6A, how do you know if you are playing?

S6A: You just know. Like when you play outside.

(Interview 13A; Block Center)

AG: Thank you. What are you doing in this center?

S10A: Well, I am trying to make a car.

AG: Can you tell me about your car?

S10A: Well, I am using a circle block to make a circle for the front of the car so I can get more blocks.
AG: You are going to get more blocks? Good thinking.

S11A: Look at this. I am going to get more blocks, too and make this have more support.

AG: S11A, wow. Tell me more about this.

S11A: This is a house and a house always needs a window. Hmmm… That doesn’t look right. (removes block and top falls off structure)

AG: Hmmm…I wonder what you could do to fix it?

S11A: I am going to put a block here so it is not so bent and so it is level.

AG: I see. Good thinking. So, S11A, is this work or is this play that you are doing?

S11A: Umm, it is play.

AG: How do you know it is play?

S11A: I like the blocks. The unifix cubes you can only build one way. Up. But the blocks can be different. Like this.

(Interview 13A; Block Center)

(Invariant Constituent 35SA)

AG: Do you get to play at school? What do you play?

S10A: I like to build. I do playdough.

(Interview 17A; Block Center)

(Invariant Constituent 36SA)

S14A: I don’t know if we are going to do math. Math work.

AG: Math is work?
S14A: Yeah. I don’t know if we are going to do it. When are we going to do math?

AG: I think you usually do math in the afternoon.

S14A: No, we never have done math.

AG: What about Math Tubs? Or Calendar?

S14A: What? That is math??

AG: What do you think?

S14A: I thought math was doing numbers and papers and stuff like that.

AG: I wonder if there are different ways to do math?

S14A: I don’t think so.

AG: So, when you do math tubs are you working or playing?

S14A: Playing, and there are no numbers.

AG: No numbers…

(In Interview 18A; Block Center)

(In Variant Constituent 37SA)

AG: What kinds of things do you do (in kindergarten)?

S12A: Play.

AG: What do you play?

S12A: We go to the playground and we have playdough. And there are toys.

(In Interview 19A; Block Center)

(In Variant Constituent 38SA)

S17A: Build and mix colors and everything.
AG: Do you get to play in kindergarten?

S17A: Of course we do.

AG: What kinds of things do you play?

S17A: Blocks and centers.

(Interview 21A; Math Tubs)

(Invariant Constituent 39SA)

AG: What do you like to play?

S8A: On the tire swing.

AG: Do you like to play anything in the classroom?

S8A: No. I don’t play in here.

(Interview 23A; Math Tubs)

(Invariant Constituent 40SA)

AG: What kinds of things do you like to play?

S15A: (long pause)

AG: Can you think of anything?

S15A: Not very many things. I guess these little blocks here. Dominos. They are like blocks, but different.

(Interview 24A; Math Tubs)

(Invariant Constituent 41SA)

AG: What kinds of things do you like to play?

S10A: Hopscotch. And I like to play hopscotch and hide and seek in the dark.

AG: Hide and Seek is fun. Do you play anything at school?
S10A: Dramatic play. That’s all.

Students; Classroom B:

(Interview 1B; On the carpet in the block area with dramatic play materials)

(Invariant Constituent 13SB)

S3B: It’s a lunch box, actually.

AG: Ah, a lunch box. I see.

S20B: Yes. It’s my lunch.

AG: S20B, Can you share with me what you were doing when I walked over just now?

S20B: Actually, I’m not in charge. These two are in charge of the game (points to S12B and S3B). You should ask them. I am just doing what they said. You should ask them because I don’t know exactly what we are playing.

AG: Okay, so I should ask them because they are in charge? S12B, can you tell me about what you are doing?

S12B: Okay, here is the real deal. Here’s the deal. We are going to do something.

AG: You are going to do something?

S12B: Oh yes, we are! It’s something like magic. Actually, it is magic.

AG: Ah, you are going to do magic? I see.

S12B: Just hold on!

AG: (laughs) Hold on? Okay. I’ll sit here and watch and you can go ahead.
S20B: These two are actually teachers and they were talking to me. Teaching me stuff. I have the lunchbox cause I’m at school. See?

AG: These are your teachers?

S20B: Well, teachers but also evil step-mothers.

S12B: Yup. We are even step-mothers. And mermaids. Even step-mother mermaids.


S3B: They can turn themselves into anything because they have magical powers.

S12B: See, there’s the magic. Wanna see us change into mermaids? (twirls, hands in the air, flops onto floor)

S20B: Yeah, watch this.

S12B: I’m a mermaid now. See.

S3B: Can I be a bad mermaid? I want to be an evil mermaid now. (The two girls, S12B and S3B walk away from block area, back to housekeeping on the other side of the room.)

S20B: They swam away.

(Interview 1B; On the carpet in the block area with dramatic play materials)

(Invariant Constituent 14SB)

AG: What do you get to play at school?

S8B: Blocks, and I read books.

AG: I love to read books.

S8B: I like to play at the kitchen.
AG: Oh! What kinds of things do you like to play at the kitchen?

S8B: I play house. And normally I play with someone else and we decide what to do.

AG: S8B, can you tell me when you get to play at school.

S8B: We play a lot. When we first get here we play.

AG: You told me about the blocks, and books, and the kitchen area. Is there anything else you get to play at school?

S8B: Doing work is something.

(Interview 1B; On the carpet in the block area with dramatic play materials)

(Invariant Constituent 14SB)

AG: What kinds of things do you like to play outside?

S8B: I like to play tag with (S21B). (laughs) That is super fun.

AG: Yes, tag is super fun. I agree.

S8B: I also like to swing. Basically those are my two favorite things outside on the playground. And I like to run down the hill and I like to go down the slide. And I like to climb up the leaf thing. And on the big playground there are two kinds of that thing except that other one is hard on your feet when you take off your shoes. They are a square with circles around them. One is for little kids. But they are also leaf things over on the big playground, too.

(Interview 2B; On the carpet in the block area with dramatic play materials)

(Invariant Constituent 15SB)
AG: Oh, yes. Your picture! That one up there? What else do you like to do?

S12B: We play a lot and we read a lot and we go to dentist and pretend. And we might watch a movie. And really that is all we do.

(Interview 2B; On the carpet in the block area with dramatic play materials)

(Invariant Constituent 16SB)

AG: Well, can you tell me about the kinds of things you do in kindergarten?

S6B: Play.

AG: Oh, you play? Can you tell me about the kinds of things that you play?

S15B is telling me he plays. What do you play, S15B?

S15B: I have food. A baby banana. I make a banana split.

AG: That looks delicious. S6B, what do you like to play?

S6B: Housekeeping.

AG: I see. What do you like to play in the housekeeping area.

S6B: Don’t know. Just play.

S15B: Hey, S6B, do you want a banana split? I have a banana split. Do you want some?

S6B: Yeah, I’ll hide it under my butt. Under my butt see? Mrs. Gibbs, see?

AG: I see. You have the banana under your bottom. What else do you play?

S6B: I like to play at my house and I have a baby brother.

AG: You have a baby brother?

S6B: Yes, his name is (xxxxxxxxxxxx).

AG: I have a brother named (xxxxxxxxxx), too. That is something that is the same about us. We both have brothers named (xxxxxxxxxx).

S6B: My brother is little.

AG: I think I saw your mom carrying him to school this morning. Did mom walk you to school?

S6B: Yup.

(Interview 3B; On the carpet in the block area with dramatic play materials)

(Invariant Constituent 17SB)

AG: What kinds of things are you doing in kindergarten?

S7B: We play.

AG: You play? I see. What kinds of things do you play?

S7B: My little pony. Umm, play babies.

AG: Oh, you play babies? Take care of the babies at school? What other kinds of things do you do?

S7B: Build with blocks.

AG: What kinds of things do you build with blocks?

S7B: A bridge.

AG: A bridge? That’s a great idea. Is there anything else you like to play at school?

S7B: No.

(Interview 3B; On the carpet in the block area with dramatic play materials)

(Invariant Constituent 18SB)
AG: Do you play outside at school?
S7B: Yup.
AG: What kinds of things do you like to play outside?
S7B: Monkey bars.

(Interview 3B; On the carpet in the block area with dramatic play materials)

(Invariant Constituent 19SB)
AG: What kinds of things do you play at school?
S14B: Housekeeping.
AG: What kinds of things do you do in housekeeping?
S14B: Play.
AG: What kinds of things do you play in housekeeping?
S14B: House.
S3B: Me, too. House.
AG: S3B, what kinds of things do you like to play in kindergarten?
S3B: I love to play family.
AG: How do you play that?
S3B: Well, somebody be’s the mom. And somebody be’s the big sister. And somebody be’s the baby. And somebody be’s the dog. And somebody be’s the dad.
AG: Oh, I see. So it sounds like a lot of friends play family together?
S3B: Yep.
AG: What else do you play at school?

S3B: My little pony.

S14B: Wait, look at me standing without my arms.

AG: You are almost standing on your head. With no arms.

S14B: (laughs)

AG: Oh, look. S7B is going to try, too. Look at your bodies. How are you doing that?

S14B: Look! No arms!

AG: Oh my goodness. Three kids on their heads, not using their arms! I wish I had a picture of that.

S14B: If you had your phone you could get a picture of it.

AG: You are right. I don’t have my phone with me. S7B, a backbend? Wow!

S14B: Look at me almost bend over! I bended my legs in a wacky way.

(Interview 3B; On the carpet in the block area with dramatic play materials)

(Invariant Constituent 20SB)

AG: S14B, what kinds of things can you play in kindergarten?

S14B: House, dollhouse, anything

S7B: Math tubs

AG: What are math tubs?

S7B: You can build with them.

(Interview 5B; Carpet Area)

(Invariant Constituent 21SB)
AG: I would like those days, too. What kinds of things do you do in your classroom?

S13B: Well, the first things we do when we get in the classroom are we have work and play.

AG: Oooo, tell me about work and play.

S13B: Well, work and play is a free time picking things and toys we might want to play with.

AG: What kinds of things do you pick to play with?

S13B: What’s nice is you can pick what ever you want to and that is what I do. I pick whatever I want to. Sometimes I just like to sit around. It’s my choice.

AG: What kinds of things do you like to play with?

S13B: Marble maze is one of my favorites. And there also is some blocks and we can make cool sculptures. Playdough, too. You can do sculptures with that too.

AG: And you like to make sculptures?

S13B: Yes, I do. It’s fun to create them.

AG: What else can you do during work and play time?

S13B: Well, there is a dollhouse and housekeeping. I had that in preschool, too, at (preschool) when I was four. I turned five when I was there.

AG: Oh, do you play with the doll house in kindergarten.

S13B: Yeah. Sometimes. That is the most weird thing that I play with.
AG: (to another child) S13Bis tell me about kindergarten. And I am recording his voice so I can listen to it later.

S13B: I also go to the kitchen area. That is housekeeping.

(Interview 6B; Carpet Area)

(Invariant Constituent 22SB)

S15B: I like to do…playdough. I like to play in housekeeping.

AG: What do you like to do in housekeeping?

S15B: I ring the phone and I eat stuff.

AG: What else do you do in kindergarten?

S15B: I play with S6B.

AG: Is S6B your friend?

S15B: Yes, he is.

(Interview 7B; Carpet Area)

(Invariant Constituent 23SB)

AG: Do you have enough time to play at school?

S13B: Oh yes. Plenty of time.

(Interview 8B; Carpet Area)

(Invariant Constituent 24SB)

S14B: I get to play dogs and I can play with cars.

AG: You get to play dogs and you get to play with cars? Nice. Are you good at playing?

S14B: Yes.
AG: How do you know?

S14B: Look at that. That is my favorite things to look at. That book.

AG: You like the book Where the Wild Things Are? That is one of my favorite books too. So, S14B, how do you know you are good at playing.

S14B: I’m nice to people and I let them play.

AG: You are nice to people. That makes you good at playing?

S14B: I think so.

(Interview 8B; Carpet Area)

(Invariant Constituent 25SB)

AG: So, S14B, do you have enough time to play in kindergarten?

S14B: Yeah.

AG: You do? What is your favorite thing to play?

S14B: Blocks.

AG: Why do you like to play?

S14B: I like playing outside on the slide.

AG: Yes, I like playing outside, too. How about in the classroom? Why do you like to play with blocks?

S14B: Cause I can build something like a tower, something different every time if I want.

(Interview 9B; Carpet Area)

(Invariant Constituent 26SB)

AG: Good. What kinds of things do you do?
S16B: Well, I do like playing with cars.

AG: What else do you like to do?

S16B: I like to play with (child, not in Class B) and S18B.

AG: Ah, play with (child, not in Class B) and S18B?

S16B: And S13B.

AG: It sounds like you have a lot of friends in kindergarten.

S16B: Yeah. The whole classroom is my friend. All my classmates are my friends.

AG: A big class family! What kinds of things do you do in kindergarten?

S16B: Build and play. And I do like to watch TV on the Smartboard.

AG: What kinds of things do you like to play at school?

S16B: I like playing with the blocks and the blue blocks. And I also like to play with Azaam and my friends outside.

AG: You get to play outside, too?

S16B: Yeah.

AG: Are you good at playing?

S16B: Yeah.

AG: How do you know you’re good at playing?

S16B: I play all the time. I am good at it.

(Interview 10B; Listening Center)

(Invariant Constituent 27SB)

AG: S20B, Are you good at playing?
S20B: (laughs) Yes!

AG: How do you know?

S20B: Cause I always play!

AG: S7B, what about you? Are you good at playing?

S7B: Oh, yeah.

AG: How do you know?

S7B: Cause I play a lot.

AG: Do you play at school?

S7B: Yes.

S4B: Yes, me too.

AG: S4B, do you have enough time to play at school?

S4B: Yes.

S20B: Yes.

AG: What are your favorite things to play in kindergarten?

S20B: I like to play the My Little Ponies.

AG: You like to play the My Little Ponies? What about you, S7B?

S7B: Mine is the housekeeping and the dollhouse.

AG: And S4B, what is your favorite thing to play?

S4B: Dollhouse and kitchen.

(Interview 10B; Listening Center)

(Invariant Constituent 28SB)

S20B: We have learned how to count all the way up to…
S7B…100!

AG: You count to 100. What else?

S20B: Well, there is a girl in our class who doesn’t even know how to spell her own name.

AG: That is something she will learn in kindergarten.

S20B: But all of us, we know how to spell our names.

AG: You know how to spell your names? S4B, what have you learned?

S4B: I’ve learned reading. I’ve learned reading big books. Umm, and I learned how to pump.

AG: You learned to pump?

S4B: I did. I learned how to pump.

AG: What did you learn to pump?

S4B: My legs. On the swing.

AG: Oh my goodness! You learned to pump your legs on the swing? Let me give you a high five for that.

S20B: Me too!

AG: High five! S7B, do you know how to pump on the swing?

S7B: Yes!

AG: Wow! High fives all around!

S20B: And we can do the monkey bars all alone with no one helping us.

S7B: And I can do one and skip one, too.

S4B: Yup.
AG: Are you kidding me? You have learned all of that?

S20B: At my old school I could hang upside down by my feet.

AG: What else have you learned at school?

S4B: We are learning ABCs.

S20B: And I can use my feet and skip bars, too.

AG: So, S4B, what kind of work do you do at school?


4. What can you learn when you play:

Students; Classroom A:

(Interview1A; Block Center)

(Invariant Constituent 42SA)

AG: What can you learn when you play, S9A?

S9A: You can learn that this elephants ears are smaller than another kind of elephants ears. So there are two kinds of elephants. There actually is. There are really two kinds.

AG: Two kinds of elephants? Do you remember what kind of elephants they are?

S9A: I can’t remember their names.

AG: I’m trying to remember. Is it Asian and African?

S9A: Oh, yeah. That’s it. Asian and African. But I don’t remember which is which.
AG: I don’t either. That is something we could investigate.

S9A: Yes. We should.

AG: What else can you learn when you play?

S9A: You might be able to learn people’s names.

AG: So we can learn about or friends? Anything else?

S9A: I don’t think so.

(Interview 7A; Math Tubs)

(Invariant Constituent 43SA)

AG: What do you think we can learn when we play?

S13A: We can learn to be nice and to share.

S4A: Don’t hit or kick.

Students; Classroom B:

(Interview 1B; On the carpet in the block area with dramatic play materials)

(Invariant Constituent 29SB)

AG: That’s very interesting. I wonder what you might learn when you play?

S8B: How to do stuff with other people. Because I’m normally a one person kind of person. I normally have just one person to play with and I need to learn to play with other people. I get grumpy when I play with other people and I need to learn to not get grumpy.

AG: I see. So when you play with your friends at school one of the things you learn is to play with other people and not get grumpy?

S8B: Yes.
AG: That sounds like something very important that you would learn when you play. Is there anything else you learn when you play?

S8B: Oh yes, I learn how to read. And I also learn how to be kind.

AG: Be kind. That is important, isn’t it?

S8B: That’s a good one for me because I can get really mad and really grumpy.

AG: I understand. We all have grumpy days, don’t we?

S8B: The reason why I don’t really want to go to school is because, well, (sister) loves to go to school.

AG: Is (sister) your sister?

S8B: Yes. And I have a baby sister too. And she likes going to her school, too.

It’s not here. My family is all different than me. My family, they enjoy being with people and I don’t. I have fights when I am with people.

AG: It sounds like you like having some time to yourself sometimes?

S8B: Yes, I do.

(Interview 2B; On the carpet in the block area with dramatic play materials)

(INVARIANT CONSTITUENT 30SB)

AG: What do you learn when you play?

S6B: I learn about myself.

AG: You learn about yourself? What kinds of things do you learn about yourself?

S6B: Just the normal stuff.

(Interview 3B; On the carpet in the block area with dramatic play materials)
AG: S7B, what do you think you can learn when you play?
S7B: We can learn to write and the ABC’s. And your numbers.
AG: Oh my! What else?
S7B: What else?

(Interview 3B; On the carpet in the block area with dramatic play materials)

AG: What kinds of things can you learn when you play, S3B?
S3B: You learn to be nice. You be safe.
AG: Anything else?
S3B: You play with blocks and stuff.

AG: S14B, what do you learn when you play?
S14B: To be nice. Everything.

(Interview 6B; Carpet Area)

AG: What can you learn when you play in kindergarten?
S13B: No..nothing. It’s just fun.

5. What kinds of work do you do in kindergarten?:

Students; Classroom A:

(Interview 1A; Block Area)

AG: So if you are having fun, you are playing? Do you do any work at school?
S9A: Kind of.

AG: What kind of work do you do in kindergarten?

S9A: Well, it’s kind of like play. Not exactly work. But play, too.

(In Interview 1A; Block Area)

(In Variant Constituent 45SA)

AG: Do you do any work in kindergarten?

S16A: Writing and drawing and counting to ten.

(In Interview 3A; Dramatic Play Center)

(In Variant Constituent 46SA)

S15A: We learn how to read and how to write and how to tie shoes if we don’t know how. Nothing with numbers though. No math.

S15A: Well, that isn’t true. We do math, too. Sometimes.

AG: Is math work or play, S15A?

S15A: Work and play

S14A: It’s work.

AG: S14B, you think that math is work? Why is it work?

S14B: It gets boring.

AG: So if it gets boring it is work?

S14B: Yup.

(In Interview 3A; Dramatic Play Center)

(In Variant Constituent 47SA)

AG: S5B, have you done any work at school? What was it?
S5B: Well, I have started work, like math.

S14B: Math is numbers.

AG: Have you done any other work, S14B?

S14B: I have, but I kind of forget what it is.

AG: S15B, have you done any work in kindergarten?

S15B: Everyday.

AG: S5A, those eggs look delicious. S13A and S5A, are you working or playing right now?

S5A: I’m working trying not to get them to steal my eggs cause I’m hungry.

AG: (laughs) I understand.

(Interview 7A; Math Tubs)

(Invariant Constituent 48SA)

S13A: We do Social Studies, well, only once. We do read alouds. We have center time. We eat lunch. We have recess. We have morning meetings. Quiet time is my favorite. And calendar. It has rules.

(Interview 7A; Math Tubs)

(Invariant Constituent 49SA)

S4A: We can learn how to read and we also learn how to take care of materials and we also know how to like, be quiet and listen to the teacher.
S3A: We know we don’t throw and we keep our eyes on the person talking and we listen to other people talking and we raise our hands to talk and we don’t have anything in our hands when we are at carpet.

(Interview 7A; Math Tubs)

(Invariant Constituent 50SA)

AG: S4A, what kind of work do you do at school?

S4A: We make placemats. We make all kinds of things. We do what the teacher tells us. We work when she says so.

AG: So you work when Teacher A says to work?

S4A: Yes.

AG: Does Teacher A tell you when to play?

S4A: Yes, she does. A little bit.

(Interview 8A; Playdough Center)

(Invariant Constituent 51SA)

AG: I notice there are other centers open, like the writing center. Do you get to play in the writing center?

S6A: Well, we write and play. We have to do words over there…Numbers and letters are work.

AG: Does Teacher A tell you when to work?

S6A: Yes. Sometimes we can choose what we want to do.

(Interview 18A; Block Center)

(Invariant Constituent 52SA)
S12A: ABC’s are work.

(Interview 19A; Block Center)

(Invariant Constituent 53SA)

AG: Do you do any work?
S17A: Sometimes.

AG: What kind of work do you do?
S17A: Write my name and coloring and numbers.

AG: So, writing your name and coloring and numbers?
S17A: Yes.

(Interview 21A; Math Tubs)

(Invariant Constituent 54SA)

AG: Do you have enough time to play in kindergarten?
S8A: No.

AG: If you aren’t playing, what are you doing?
S8A: Working and reading.

(Interview 25A; Small Group Rotations/Guided Discoveries)

(Invariant Constituent 55SA)

S10A: I’m sorting them. I’m working right now.
S14A: I’m making a circle.
S16A: I’m sorting them and playing with them.
S15A: A pattern. A circle. This is work and play…cause you are working when you play. What are you writing down? (I tell him I am writing some of the things
he is telling me and I read it back to him.) Oh, I didn’t know you were writing it down. I’m not even giving you my best stuff. I have some better stuff to tell you.

I made football teams. 5 on each team. (I ask how many teams he has) 3 teams. (I ask how many players he has in all…he counts) 15 total. If I have another team I will have 20 players.

S5A: This is work. I’m making a bear square.


S9A: S13A, that is really good counting!)

S12A: I’m working, sorting them into big piles.

S11A: I’m sorting them into different groups. All that is left is red and yellow. If I need red I can find it in that pile.

I’m building towers. It is work. The towers have to be the same color.

Students; Classroom B:

(Interview 3B; On the carpet in the block area with dramatic play materials)

(Invariant Constituent 34SB)

AG: Do you ever do work at school? What do you do that is work?

S7B: We read out in the hall. We read the book.

AG: You read in the hall?

S7B: Yes.

AG: Do you do any other work at school?
S7B: Not yet.

(Interview 4B; Carpet Area)

(Invariant Constituent 35SB)

AG: Here you go. S14B, do you do any work at school?

S14B: Yes.

AG: What kind of work do you do?

S14B: Umm, it’s kind of like voting for something. Or building something, like a car. And you can play in housekeeping. You can play with pretend money, like that. And at my cousin’s house, he has a savings. He puts money in his thing until it dings. And when it dings, you can open it.

AG: That’s very interesting. Anything else you would like to tell me?

S14B: See that stuff down there? Those papers? Those are mine. I did that stuff. (points to a book cover and writing he had done earlier in the morning)

AG: You did those? Was that play or was that work?

S14B: Oh, that was work. It’s on a paper. I’m done talking now.

(Interview 6B; Carpet Area)

(Invariant Constituent 36SB)

AG: Do you do any work in kindergarten?

S15B: Yes! Ummm, I do …I go to the office.

AG: You take the attendance to the office?

S15B: Yes, it’s a job.

(Interview 7; Carpet Area)
(Invariant Constituent 37SB)

AG: Ah, that makes sense. Is there anything you do in kindergarten that is just work?

S13B: No. Because it is fun and you can use your imagination. You could have imagined there was a pumpkin patch on orange day. Or you could have said, “I see an orange pumpkin.”

6. How do you know if something is work?:

Students; Classroom A:

(Interview 3A; Dramatic Play Center)

(Invariant Constituent 56SA)

S15A: Well, that isn’t true. We do math, too. Sometimes.

AG: Is math work or play, S15A?

S15A: Work and play

S14A: It’s work.

AG: S14A, you thing that math is work? Why is it work?

S14A: It gets boring.

AG: So if it gets boring it is work?

S14A: Yup.

(Interview A; Dramatic Play Center)

(Invariant Constituent 57SA)

AG: How do you know if something is work?

S13A: You know when you do it.
(Interview 8A; Playdough Table)

(Invariant Constituent 58SA)

S6A: Numbers and letters are work.

AG: How do you know they are work?

S6A: I don’t know.

AG: Does Teacher A tell you when to work?

S6A: Yes. Sometime we choose what we want to do.

S4A: Sometimes.

AG: Does she tell you when to play?

S4A: She does sometimes.

(Interview 9A; Dramatic Play Center)

(Invariant Constituent 59SA)

S15A: Umm, I think that homework is work.

AG: Oh, what kind of homework do you have?

S15A: We don’t really have homework. We do our work at school. We work with papers. I think that is work.

AG: What kinds of things do you do with paper?

S15A: We illustrate songs and other things like draw pictures. We do things like that.

(Interview 10A; Math Tubs)

(Invariant Constituent 60SA)

AG: What do you do when you work?
S9A: Teach people stuff.

AG: Do you work in kindergarten?

S9A: Kind of.

AG: What kind of work do you do in kindergarten?

S9A: Just teaching stuff.

(Interview 10A; Math Tubs)

(Invariant Constituent 61SA)

S16A: Umm, you do this first and then math tubs. Some goes on the floor and some goes on the table. That one does not have a shape.

AG: When you have math tubs are you working or playing?

S16A: Playing, but sometimes the teacher will say, “Get back to work.”

AG: Oh, I see. Teacher A tells you to get back to work.

(Interview 13A; Block Center)

(Invariant Constituent 62SA)

AG: S10A, are you working or playing over here?

S10A: Working.

AG: How do you know that this is work?

S10A: Cause it is circle and circles are work.

AG: I see. So a circle is work? Shapes are work, then?

S10A: Yup.

(Interview 13A; Block Center)

(Invariant Constituent 63SA)
AG: Do you do any work in kindergarten?

S11A: I have to get my work done if I want to play.

(Interview 17A; Block Center)

(Invariant Constituent 64SA)

S14A: I don’t know if we are going to do math. Math work.

AG: Math is work?

S14A: Yeah. I don’t know if we are going to do it. When are we going to do math?

AG: I think you usually do math in the afternoon.

S14A: No, we never have done math.

AG: What about Math Tubs? Or Calendar?

S14A: What? That is math??

AG: What do you think?

S14A: I thought math was doing numbers and papers and stuff like that.

AG: I wonder if there are different ways to do math?

S14A: I don’t think so.

AG: So, when you do math tubs are you working or playing?

S14A: Playing, and there are no numbers.

AG: No numbers…

(Interview 19A; Block Center)

(Invariant Constituent 65SA)

AG: How do you know it is work?
S17A: Because the teacher tells me to. I made a boat, too. S12A made one, too.

AG: I see three boats.

A: S18A made a museum. (starts crying)

AG: S17A, tell me why you are crying.

A: I heard the teacher say she is going to ring the chime. I don’t have enough time to play. I never have enough time.

(Interview 23A; Math Tubs)

(Invariant Constituent 66SA)

S15A: Cutting things. Like those apples over there.

AG: Oh, I see the apple activity they are working on over there. How did you know it was work?

S15A: Yeah, well. It was work cause it was hard and Teacher A said come do it.

(Interview 25A; Small Group Rotations/Guided Discoveries)

(Invariant Constituent 67SA)

S14A: Teacher A told me to work here.

S17A: I keep messing up my work.

S7A: I’m making little circles. I’m doing kindergarten work.

Students; Classroom B:

(Interview 1B; On the carpet in the block area with dramatic play materials)

(Invariant Constituent 38SB)

S8B: Doing work is something.
AG: I see. You do work? Is work different than play?

S8B: Yes. Sort of.

AG: What makes it different?

S8B: Work is when you make stuff. Or do stuff with the teacher.

AG: What kinds of stuff might you make when you work?

S8B: You might make words or money. Or fill in paper work. That is work, for sure.

(Interview 2B; On the carpet in the block area with dramatic play materials)

(Intvariant Constituent 39SB)

AG: What kind of work do you do at school?

S6B: Money. Look at all the money. (points to housekeeping/dramatic play area)

(Interview 5B; Carpet Area)

(Intvariant Constituent 40SB)

S13B: Well, play is something you can do with like blocks. The papers and stuff that we fill in are work. Do you like my new shoes?

7. What/When/How do you work in kindergarten?:

Students; Classroom A:

(Interview 10A; Math Tubs)

(Intvariant Constituent 68SA)

S16A: Umm, you do this first and then math tubs. Some goes on the floor and some goes on the table. That one does not have a shape.
AG: When you have math tubs are you working or playing?

S16A: Playing, but sometimes the teacher will say, “Get back to work.”

AG: Oh, I see. Teacher A tells you to get back to work.

(Interview 11A; Block Area)

(Invariant Constituent 69SA)

AG: So S7A, were you and S3A working or were you playing over here?

S7A: Working

AG: You were working? What made this work?

S7A: Cause we were together and we worked on this.

AG: So you were working together?

S7A: Uh-huh.

(Interview 15A; Block Area)

(Invariant Constituent 70SA)

AG: S4A, I see you and S19A are building together. How did you decide what to do?

S4A: We just started.


AG: Are you working or playing?

In unison: Working.

AG: How do you know that you are working?

S4A: It is working and playing together. Working and playing at the same time.

AG: I see. So, you can work and play at the same time.
S4A: Actually, we work to build it first and then we will play with it.

AG: Oh! So the work is building it and playing is…

S4A: Yes. When we play our stuff with it.

(Interview 17A; Block Area)

(Invariant Constituent 71SA)

AG: Do you do work in kindergarten?

S5A: Experiments and papers, usually. Want a piece of Belinda’s birthday cake?

AG: I would love one.

S14A: I don’t know if we are going to do math. Math work.

AG: Math is work?

S14A: Yeah. I don’t know if we are going to do it. When are we going to do math?

AG: I think you usually do math in the afternoon.

S14A: No, we never have done math.

AG: What about Math Tubs? Or Calendar?

S14A: What? That is math??

AG: What do you think?

S14A: I thought math was doing numbers and papers and stuff like that.

AG: I wonder if there are different ways to do math?

B: I don’t think so.

AG: So, when you do math tubs are you working or playing?

S14A: Playing, and there are no numbers.
Students; Classroom B:

(Interview 2B; On the carpet in the block area with dramatic play materials)

(Invariant Constituent 41SB)

AG: Do you do any work at school?

S12B: (sings) Yes, we do!

AG: What kind of work do you do at school?

S12B: Ummm, we build blocks. We play with food. We might have to work with my teacher. And we talk on the phone.

AG: You do like to talk on the phone. What kinds of things do you like to play at school?

S12B: Okay. Goodbye. I need to swim over there.

(Interview 3B; On the carpet in the block area with dramatic play materials)

(Invariant Constituent 42SB)

AG: What else do you do in kindergarten?

S14B: We do projects.

AG: When you are doing projects is that playing or working?

S12B: Working.

(Interview 5B; Carpet Area)

(Invariant Constituent 43SB)

AG: Can you tell me about the work? You said you have work and play time. What is the work that you do?
S13B: Well, I think she just calls it work and play. So we don’t do a lot of work.
Well, we do actually. See them at the tables? They are working.
AG: Oh, what kind of work do they do at the tables?
S13B: We get checked and we get called over to write some things like…since
it’s green day we all have a small skinny page of paper that says, “I see a
green…” and then we color in after we have chosen to write what we see is green.
AG: Have you done that yet today?
S13B: Not yet.

(Interview 5B; Carpet Area)
(Invariant Constituent 44SB)

S13B: Well, during rainbow centers I go to the workjobs and that is work. First I
go to the rainbow center and we do our activities and stuff.
AG: What types of things do you do during workjobs?
S13B: Well, the first thing I might do …well, there are three groups and I am in
the beautiful butterflies. Today there is the listening center, the painting center,
and one is housekeeping. I’ll tell you about he post office and my little ponies
later. We haven’t gotten to that yet. Then there is the rice table and reading
center. You can read books in a bathtub.
AG: So then during rainbow centers you do workjobs?
S13B: No, not at the same time. We do a switch. And then to workjobs.
AG: What kinds of things do you do in workjobs?
S13B: Let me show you. There are all of these bags with your name on it and we will do one bag a day. And the next day we will do another. Me and S9B and S19B are all in the same rainbow center.

8. What can you learn when you do work in kindergarten?:

Students; Classroom A:

(Interview 1A; Block Center)

(Invariant Constituent 72SA)

AG: When you work at school, what kinds of things can you learn?

S9A: Well, if you are a teacher at a high school you can teach the other kids some stuff.

AG: I see. What can you learn if you are in kindergarten?

S9A: So the teachers help you learn.

(Interview 4A; Dramatic Play Center)

(Invariant Constituent 73SA)

S17A: I just keep messing up.

AG: You keep messing up?

S17A: I just take too long and I don’t like messing up and I just want to do the activities that the teacher wants me to do. But I don’t know how to do all of those things.

AG: A lot of what we learn in kindergarten is how to do all of those things. And it is okay to mess up. I mess up a lot. What is your favorite thing to do in kindergarten?
S17A: My favorite thing to do in kindergarten is to do good but I’m not doing good still.

(Interview 10A; Math Tubs)

(Invariant Constituent 74SA)

AG: What have you learned in kindergarten?

S9A: Well, in preschool I learned that there is only two kinds of elephants.

AG: What are the two kinds of elephants?

S9A: Asian and African. One has a bigger ear than the other ones but I can’t remember which one it is.

S16A: I know. It’s the mommy one.

S9A: The grandpa one.

AG: Why do you think the grandpa elephant would have the biggest ears?

S9A: Because the boys are usually bigger than girls. And there is nothing bigger than a grandpa.

S16A: babies would have the smallest ears.

S9A: I know my phone number: 6XX-XXX-XXXX.

(Interview 17A; Block Center)

(Invariant Constituent 75SA)

S14A: Yes.

AG: What do you learn?

S14A: I learn…well, stuff.
S5A: I don’t like to work.

Students; Classroom B:

(Interview 2B; On the carpet in the block area with dramatic play materials)

(Invariant Constituent 45SB)

AG: Can I ask you one more question? I asked you what you learned when you played and you gave me some wonderful ideas. What kinds of things do you learn when you do your work at school?

S8B: I learn how to do things.

AG: What kinds of things?

S8B: I learn how to write and how to spell my name. And capital and lowercase letters.

AG: Oh! What are the letters in your name?

S8B: X-X-X-X. Capital or lowercase.

(Interview 2B; On the carpet in the block area with dramatic play materials)

(Invariant Constituent 46SB)

AG: What can you learn when you do work?

S6B: Letters. Making stuff.

AG: What can you learn when you make stuff?

S6B: All kinds of stuff.

(Interview 3B; On the carpet in the block area with dramatic play materials)

(Invariant Constituent 47SB)

AG: What can you learn when you work?
S7B: Writing the ABC’s.

AG: Anything else?

S7B: Nope.

(Interview 6B; Carpet Area)

(Invariant Constituent 48SB)

AG: What might you learn when you work in kindergarten?

S13B: To write. We have to learn to draw. In work jobs we can learn to match up things and write numbers.

(Interview 7B; Carpet Area)

(Invariant Constituent 49SB)

AG: Nice. Can you think about and tell me some of the things you have learned in kindergarten so far?

S13B: Well, for the orange song we did. It was a really fun song. I will talk about it after the recording. We don’t need to put the actual song on there.

AG: Okay. Sounds good. What else have you learned, besides the orange song?

S13B: We learned the white song, too.

9. How do you feel when you play?:

Students; Classroom A:

(Interview 12A; Block Center)

(Invariant Constituent 76SA)

AG: How do you feel when you play?

S6A: Happy
S8A: So happy.

(Interview 15A; Block Center)

(Intvariant Constituent 77SA)

AG: Interesting. How do you feel when you play?

S19A: Good.

S4A: Happy.

(Interview 17A; Block Center)

(Intvariant Constituent 78SA)

AG: How do you feel when you play?

S5A: Good.

AG: S14A, how do you feel when you play?

S14A: Good, happy, too.

(Interview 20A; Block Center)

(Intvariant Constituent 79SA)

AG: Six blocks. That’s right. How do you feel when you play?

S2A: Good. But I have to build my monster now. So I can kill him.

(Interview S21A; Math Tubs)

(Intvariant Constituent 80SA)

AG: How do you feel when you play?

S8A: Happy.

AG: I feel happy when I play, too.

(Interview S23A; Math Tubs)
AG: Thank you for showing me what you built. Oh, I have one more question. How do you feel when you play?

S15A: Umm, nervous.

AG: Nervous? That is a good describing word. Why do you feel nervous?

S15A: Well, because when I am using stuff like blocks and dominos, I’m scared that someone might bump my stuff.

AG: Oh, you are afraid it might get knocked over?

S15A: Yeah. I’m just thinking, “Don’t hit the table hard.”

AG: If you were playing in dramatic play, how would you feel? If you were in the kitchen?

S15A: Not like nervous, not like scared, so I guess, more happy.

AG: Happy? Yes, I feel happy when I play sometimes, too. Thank you for talking with me again.

Students; Classroom B:

AG: How do you feel when you play?

S10A: Good.

Students; Classroom B:

AG: How do you feel when you play?
S13B: Super good.
AG: Good. You feel good? Anything else?
S13B: That’s the best thing. (gets on all fours, panting).
AG: Oh my, now I’m talking to a puppy?
S13B: (barks)
AG: What do you need puppy?
S13B: (barks) That means I need someone to tie my shoe.
AG: May I help you with that? There you go.
S13B: (wanders off, on all fours…panting)
(Interview 8B; Carpet Area)
(Invariant Constituent 51SB)
AG: I see. I have one more question for you. How do you feel when you play?
S14B: Happy.
(Interview 9B; Carpet Area)
(Invariant Constituent 52SB)
AG: How do you feel when you are playing?
S16B: Good. I do like playing with S13B and S11B.
AG: How do you feel when you play with them?
S16B: I feel really happy.
AG: How do you feel when you are at school?
S16B: I feel happy here.
(Interview 10B; Listening Center)
AG: S20B, I’m going to ask you first: Are you good at playing?
S20B: (laughs) Yes.
AG: How do you know?
S20B: Cause I always play.
AG: You always play. How do you feel when you play?
S20B: Happy.

10. How do you feel when you work?:

Students; Classroom A:

(Interview 12A; Block Center)

AG: How do you feel when you are working?
S6A: Still happy. But we have to do the work.

Students; Classroom B:

(Interview 1B; On the carpet in the block area with dramatic play materials)

S8B: Normally I like doing the work. That’s my favorite thing. Cause I need to do something and think, “hmmm, what can I do?” And then I try to get my work done as fast as I can.
AG: You try to get your work done quickly? Why?
S8B: Cause then it will be time to clean up and I am not bored. And I play more.
AG: Do you like the work in kindergarten?
S13B: Yes.
AG: Why do you like the work?
S13B: Well, Mrs. Gibbs, you can use your brain. And I am a really smart guy. So I like using my brain. There is a lot I can do with my brain.
AG: You are a smart guy, S13B. Do you think you use your brain when you play?
S13B: I never thought of it before. But, maybe.
Student Themes; Clustering, Thematizing, and Final Identification of the Invariant Constituents

Table 7

*Themes and Descriptions of Students’ Lived Experience of Play in the Kindergarten Classroom*

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Thematic Textural-Structural Descriptions: Students

Thematic textural-structural descriptions were constructed for each group of students, following the same protocol used with the teachers’ data. This description incorporated the previously determined invariant constituents and themes and sought to emphasize the meanings and essence of the experience of play from the students’ perspective. The textural-structural descriptions are represented below.

Students: Classroom A. Classroom A is comprised of 20 students, 11 males and 9 females, ranging in age from four to six years old. The students in this classroom represent a very diverse population, originating from nine different countries: The United States of America, China, Taiwan, Russia, Gambia, Ethiopia, Ecuador, Bangladesh, and Saudi Arabia. The majority of these children speak their native language, as well as English, with three students receiving English Language Learner Services (ELL) to enhance their language abilities and support their successful integration into American schools and culture. The socio-economic status of children in Classroom A is also diverse. While some students are the children of professors or administrators at the local university, other students live in extreme poverty. Ability level of the group varies widely, as not all children have had school experience prior to entering kindergarten. One student receives special education services, as outlined in an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Two additional students in Classroom A are in the process of being evaluated for special education services by the school’s Intervention Assistance Team (IAT). Nineteen of the twenty families gave consent for their children to participate in this study. Interviews were conducted in the classroom over an eight week
time period, while children were engaged in what the teacher perceived as play-based
centers, including the dramatic play, playdough, and block centers and math tubs.

Students in classroom A maintain that they are given opportunities to play each
day in kindergarten, though they do not all perceive play as occurring in the same way.
When asked specifically if they were able to play in kindergarten, two responses
dominated the conversation, “Of course we do” and “Actually, we don’t play in our
classroom.” The students in this classroom identify their primary play experiences as
being tied to two specific times of the day; teacher-directed learning centers and outdoor
recess. Teacher-directed learning centers account for the majority of play experienced
inside the classroom. When asked specifically about play opportunities and how they get
to play in kindergarten, students responded with similar experiences that include the
dramatic play center and the block center, sharing, “Dramatic play cause there is a really
big football jersey and it looks like wings…(and) building tall towers,” and “You can
play Candy Land and look at shells and play with blocks and build some towers and write
or draw some pictures.” Playdough Center, playing with “toys”, and going to “centers”
were also classified as play opportunities inside the classroom. Other students in
Classroom A classified their play experiences as occurring on the playground at “recess.”
The tire swing, tag, hide and seek, “swing and slide,” and hopscotch were all common
outdoor play experiences as cited by the students.

Students in Classroom A experience a number of types of play throughout the
course of a typical day at school, as garnered from the interview data. Large motor play
occurs on the playground during outdoor recess as children participate in activities that
allow them to run, swing, and jump, utilizing their large muscle systems. Children engage in symbolic play, specifically in the dramatic play center, as they use one object to represent another, “I’m giving the baby chocolate cake (blocks); It’s he’s birthday!” Construction play and make-believe play dominate the play experiences of the students. Opportunities to explore blocks and other building materials in the block center allow children the opportunity to freely create structures using their imaginations. Make-believe play is most often represented in the dramatic play center as children engage in role-playing situations that they create and navigate among themselves, “I am a baby and (she) is a mommy and (he) is a dad and (he) is a dad…a teenage dad.” While other types of play were observed throughout the course of this research project, such as sensory and small motor play, they were not explicitly identified or described by the students as relating to how they experience play in kindergarten.

The students in Classroom A resoundingly describe play in kindergarten as “fun” and as open-ended experiences where they are able to make their own decisions about not only what they play, but how they play, as well. One student, when asked how they know they are playing, shares, “(i)f you see someone having fun then you are seeing them playing” while another maintains, “I decided what to build. I am making the blocks high like this.” Further, the students view play as an experience where they are actively engaged with their peers, “I also want to play with my friends…sometimes my friend doesn’t include everyone and that is sad,” and “We play together!”

Students in Classroom A experience play through structure and teacher-dictated rules. Opportunities to play are limited to approximately 10 minutes at a time in a
teacher specified learning center, such as blocks or dramatic play. When a chime rings, children stop their play and clean up their area, rotating to the next center. One student, crying, shares, “I heard the teacher say she is going to ring the chime. I don’t have enough time to play; I never have enough time,” a sentiment shared by multiple students in the class.

Students in Classroom A hold a number of beliefs and perceptions about play. The characteristics of play are clearly articulated by the children, and align with Rubin’s (1983) characteristics of play; “(p)lay means having fun, like if you see some toys you can explore them and that is called play.” Additionally, play is perceived as meaning “you can play with the things you want to play with” and that “you can have time with your friends playing together and getting exercise and stuff.” Within this context, the children in Classroom A know they are playing simply “by doing it,” because it is “fun,” and most importantly, the experience was intrinsically motivated and student-directed, “I decided what to make!” Overwhelmingly, there is a strong correlation between the students in Classroom A and their self-esteem as it relates to play. In all but one instance, students shared that they are “very good” at playing and that playing makes them feel “good” and “so happy.” One student self-reported that playing makes him feel “nervous or scared” in part due to the fact that he might get in trouble for having something fall over.

The students in Classroom A have strong beliefs about what they learn when they play, and these beliefs align with three of the four major learning domains: cognitive, social, and emotional contexts. The students share that they are able to enhance their
academic or cognitive knowledge through play. For example, “You can learn there are
two kinds of elephants,” and “We write and we play.” Social and emotional skills are
also at the forefront of play-based learning as the children share that they “learn to be
nice and share...you might be able to learn people’s names” as well as learning that we,
“don’t hit or kick.”

The students in Classroom A perceive work to be experienced in a number of
ways. Work in kindergarten is a task that is teacher-directed through direct instruction;
“Yeah, well, it was work cause (Teacher A) said to come do it. (Teacher A) told me to
come work here.” The students further elaborate that there are times they feel that the
activity they are engaged in is play until “the teacher will say ‘get back to work’.” The
best work, the students maintain, is when work is “kind of like play...not exactly work,
but play, too.”

Work is experienced “everyday” as an activity that is predominately separate
from play in Classroom A. Work is viewed as having an academic base and consists of
activities that involve “letters” such as “writing and drawing” and learning how to “read
and how to write and how to tie our shoes if we don’t know how.” Math is also
considered work as it involved “numbers” and “counting to ten.” Activities that have
“rules” are also considered work. For example, Calendar Time is considered work due in
large part to the “rules” that govern that activity; “we know...to...be quiet and listen to
the teacher” and “we don’t throw and we keep our eyes on the person talking and we
listen to other people talking and we raise our hand to talk and we don’t have anything in
our hands when we are at carpet.” Finally, the children consider any activity that
involves pencils and “papers” and are product-oriented to be work, “we work with papers...we fill them in.”

Work is also something that can produce high levels of stress in some of the children in Classroom A as one child shared, “I keep messing up my work...I just keep messing up.” Upon further discussion, this student maintained that work is upsetting to her because, “I just take too long and I don’t like messing up and I just want to do the activities the teacher wants me to do.” She concludes by sharing that, “my favorite thing to do in kindergarten is to do good, but I’m not doing good still.” This feeling of inadequacy comes, in part, due to the product-oriented nature of much of what the children perceive as work (worksheets and table work) in the classroom.

Students’ beliefs and perceptions about work are consistent across the class. Students classify work as “boring” and something the “teacher tells us” to do. Students in Classroom A maintain that they “work when (Teacher A) says so and that work is often project or product-oriented, “we make placemats...we make all kinds of things.” The students also view work as something that they interpret to have an academic basis, such as math, shapes, counting and letters. A student shared that Math Tubs were a play-based activity, although classified by the teacher as math. When probed further about this, he stated that it couldn’t be work because there were “no numbers,” only blocks and other things to build with.

Students maintain that if something is work, “you know when you do it” and that it often involves “papers” that “teach people stuff.” Further, the students see play as something that happens after their work has finished, “I have to get my work done if I
want to play.” While students in Classroom A do not perceive there to be an overlap between work and play in their classroom, they do feel that it is possible to work and play together. While two students are building together in the block center they share that they are “…working and playing together, working and playing at the same time.” They go on to state that, “actually, we work to build it first, and then we will play with it.” Finally, students perceive work as something that must be done, as articulated by one student, “…because that’s how it is at school sometimes, you know? Work. Work. Work. But it’s okay.”
Figure 4: Thematic textual-structural representation of the students in class A's experience with play in the kindergarten classroom.

How Play is Experienced:
- Learning Centers
- Teacher Directed vs. Student Directed
- Types of Play
- Rules/Structure
- Process Oriented
- Active Engagement
- Experience
- Benefits of Play
- Self-esteem
- Characterizations of Play
- Definition of Play
- About Play

Beliefs and Perceptions:
- Teacher Directed
- Direct Instruction
- Product-oriented
- Academic-based
- Structure/Rules-based
- Direct Instruction
- Teacher Directed
- Experience
- How Works

How Work is Experienced:
- Teacher Directed
- Direct Instruction
- Academic-based
- Structure/Rules-based
- Product-oriented
- Teacher Directed
- Experience
- How Works

Beliefs and Perceptions:
- Teacher Directed
- Direct Instruction
- Academic-based
- Structure/Rules-based
- Product-oriented
- Teacher Directed
- Experience
- How Works

Beliefs and Perceptions:
- Teacher Directed
- Direct Instruction
- Academic-based
- Structure/Rules-based
- Product-oriented
- Teacher Directed
- Experience
- How Works

Beliefs and Perceptions:
- Teacher Directed
- Direct Instruction
- Academic-based
- Structure/Rules-based
- Product-oriented
- Teacher Directed
- Experience
- How Works
Students: Classroom B. Classroom B is comprised of 21 students, 10 males and 11 females, ranging in age from four to six years old. The students in this classroom represent a diverse population, as the students originate from four different countries; The United States of America, China, Ukraine, and Saudi Arabia. The majority of these children speak their native language, as well as English, with four students receiving English Language Learner Services (ELL) to enhance their language abilities and support their successful integration into American schools and culture. However, two children in the class speak only their native language and are unable to communicate in English. The socio-economic status of children in Classroom B is also diverse. While some students are the children of professors, attorneys and doctors, other students live in extreme poverty and receive public assistance. One child in Classroom B was born addicted to drugs and has subsequently been adopted by a new family. A number of children reside in blended, divorced or single-parent families, as well. Ability level of the group varies widely, as not all children have had school experience prior to entering kindergarten. No students in this classroom receive special education services. Twenty of the twenty-one families gave consent for their children to participate in this study. Interviews were conducted in the classroom over an eight-week time period, while children were engaged in what the teacher deemed free play time.

The students in Classroom B perceive play as being the main activity that grounds their entire experience in kindergarten. Every child interviewed indicates that play occurs each day at school and that, in fact, “we play a lot.” The students in Classroom B share that play is experienced in a variety of ways, including inside the classroom and
outside on the playground. “Work and Play Time” was identified by students as one of the major opportunities they have to play inside the classroom. During this open-ended playtime, students expressed that they have “a free time picking things and toys we might want to play with.” Students maintain that their play is student-directed, as opposed to teacher directed in nature; “what’s nice is you can pick whatever you want to do and that is what I do. I pick whatever I want to. Sometimes I just like to sit around. It’s my choice.” Another child elaborates that Teacher B does not decide what, where, or who they get to play, but rather, “we decided for ourselves…you can just see what you want to play” and “normally I play with someone else and we decide what to do.”

When students were asked specifically about the types of things they play in kindergarten, their responses were elaborate. Some children spoke of the differing centers or areas of the classroom they like to play in, such as, housekeeping, playdough, listening center, rice table, and blocks. Others cited specific toys such as the My Little Ponies, Marble Maze or the dollhouse. Nearly all children, however, gave specific examples of play experiences or scenarios that they have participated in at school, including; “walking around with your babies…play family;” “(t)hese two are actually teachers and they were talking to me, teaching me stuff…we are even step-mother mermaids;” “I have food. A baby banana. I make a banana split;” “I love to play family…somebody be’s the mom. And somebody be’s the big sister. And somebody be’s the baby. And somebody be’s the dog. And somebody be’s the dad;” and “I get to play dogs and I can play with cars.” The students also discussed outdoor play
opportunities. Playing tag, swinging, sliding on the sliding board, and monkey bars were all outside play experiences discussed by the students.

The students in Classroom B experience a number of types of play throughout the day at school. Large motor play is experienced as they are able to participate in activities that engage their large muscle systems both inside and outside the classroom. Running, chasing, swinging, riding, and climbing occur on the playground, while gymnastics and other large motor play is acceptable, within reason, inside the classroom. Small motor play is evident as children are able to select activities that incorporate the use of small motor systems, such as pouring and pinching at the rice table and drawing, writing, and cutting at the writing center. The students utilize rules-based play, where they are able to negotiate their own rules and outcomes for play, during their free play experiences; “Actually, I’m not in charge. These two are in charge…I am just doing what they said.” Opportunities for construction play abound as children explore and create structures with blocks and other building materials, often utilizing materials from other areas of the room. Students engage in imaginative and symbolic play as they create self-directed play narratives, utilizing a blanket for a mermaid tail and the carpet for the ocean; “They can turn themselves into anything because they are magic. See, there’s the magic! Wanna see us change into mermaids? (twirls, hands in air, flops onto floor).” Playing with the arts and sensory play are encouraged as students have the opportunity to freely interact with art and sensory materials such as paint, rice, dry pasta, and playdough; “We can make cool sculptures…It’s fun to create them!”

The students in Classroom B hold many beliefs and perceptions about play in
kindergarten. The students’ beliefs about play align with the characteristics of play, as presented by Rubin (1983). The students portray the intrinsic motivation associated with play as they describe it to be “fun” and their “favorite thing to do,” and something that makes them “feel really happy.” The students depict play as being controlled by the players in that it is simply their “choice” as to where, what and whom they get to play with at school, as they get to “pick whatever (we) want.” Process is more important than product to the children as they have the freedom to choose “something different every time if I want” and perhaps most importantly, “there is no wrong way to play.” Externally imposed rules center around safety and not around what or how the children can play; “Be nice to others…be safe in the classroom…don’t get hurt…don’t run in the classroom.” Finally, the students strongly support the premise that play is non-literal and requires active engagement, as they participate in multiple imaginative and pretend play scenarios seamlessly throughout the day. One student, while talking with the researcher in the classroom, stops, takes a pretend phone out of her purse, answers it and says, “Mrs. Gibbs? Hold on a minute. I’m getting a call. She’s trying to call me and can’t talk to you and answer the phone.” Another student enters the play scenario from across the room, and using a block for a telephone, begins a conversation; “Hi. Listen, don’t open up your house or a flood will come get you cause our magic is full.” This play scenario continues, with four other children entering and exiting the experience for the next 20 minutes.

The students in Classroom B perceive the benefits of play to be numerous. These benefits span the four of the major learning domains: physical, social, emotional and
cognitive. The students believe that they learn a great deal physically through play, as shared by multiple students; “I learned how to pump…my legs, on the swings” and “we (learned to) do the monkey bars all alone with no one helping us.” Cognitive or academic knowledge is also enhanced through play, as perceived by the students; “I’ve learned reading;” “We have learned how to count all the way up to…100!” “We know how to spell our names…we are learning ABC’s;” and finally, “We can learn to write…and your numbers.” The development of social-emotional constructs is perceived to be of great importance to the students as they learn “how to do stuff with other people…I need to learn to play with other people.” The students further elaborate, sharing, “I get grumpy when I play with other people. I need to learn to not get grumpy.” Students maintain that through play they “learn how to be kind” and “to be nice,” goals reinforced by Teacher B daily. Students self-report high self-esteem as it relates to play and play-based experiences in the classroom. When asked about play, students maintain they are “good at it” because “I always play!” Playing makes them feel “really happy” and additionally, enhances their positive feelings about school; “I feel happy here.” Finally, a student shares that play is important because, “I learn about myself.” When asked what kinds of things he can learn about himself, the student reveals, seriously, “(j)ust the normal stuff.” In response, another child shares his agreement of this statement, maintaining that you can learn “everything” through play.

The students in Classroom B had far less to share about their perceptions of work in kindergarten. Students expressed that work is experienced in the classroom through teacher-directed instruction; “We might have to work with my teacher” and “We get
checked and we get called over to write some things.” The students share that although Teacher B describes their morning activities as “work and play,” they do not necessarily view them as such; “I think she just calls it work and play…we don’t do a lot of work.”

The students in Classroom B view work as an activity that is embedded in, not separated from, play. When asked about how they experience work in the classroom, the students shared many examples, some student-directed play-based activities; “We build blocks. We play with food…and we talk on the phone,” as well as other play-based activities that are teacher-directed during Rainbow Centers, teacher-determined play centers during Work Jobs; “Today there is listening center, the painting center, and one is housekeeping.” Work also has an academic connotation for students as they describe reading books, “learn(ing) to write and how to spell my name,” completing projects with the teacher, and “the papers and stuff that we fill in” as work-based experiences.

The beliefs and perceptions students hold about work are consistent across Classroom B. Work in Classroom B is described as both product-oriented and teacher-directed; “Work is when you make stuff. Or do stuff with the teacher.” This work takes the form of many academic-based tasks, such as, completing “papers.” As numerous students explained, any activity that involves worksheets or filling in papers, “that is work, for sure.” Students categorize academic-based work as activities that include working with “letters,” “writing the ABC’s,” “learn(ing) to draw…match(ing) up things, and writ(ing) numbers.” Finally, the students agree that while “doing work” is something they have to do in kindergarten, they enjoy participating in this work because “it is fun
and you can use your imagination.” As one child shared, “You can use your brain, and I am a really smart guy, so I like using my brain. There is a lot I can do with my brain.”
Figure 5: Thematic textual-structural representation of the students in class B’s experience with play in the kindergarten classroom.
Composite Thematic Textural-Structural Descriptions: Students

The final level of analysis of the student data, as with the teacher data, was to complete a composite description of the students’ experiences with play in the kindergarten classrooms. This composite thematic textural-structural description represents the students as a group, focusing on the meanings and essence of their combined lived experiences. The composite thematic textural-structural description of the students in Classroom A and Classroom B is presented below.

The demographics of the students in Classroom A and the students in Classroom B are very similar in their diverse composition. Classroom A is comprised of 20 students, 11 males and 9 females, originating from nine different countries. Many of these students are multi-lingual, speaking both their native language and English, and as a result, receive ELL services to enhance their English abilities both inside and outside of the classroom. Classroom B is comprised of 21 students, 10 males and 11 females, originating from four different countries. Four of the students receive ELL services. The socioeconomic status of both classrooms is also diverse. Many students in each classroom are from affluent homes, with parents holding professional positions with advanced degrees, however; a number of students live in families that face extreme poverty and rely on public assistance to meet their basic needs. Classroom A has one child receiving special education services, with two additional students going through the referral process for special education identification. None of the children in Classroom B receive or have been referred for special education. In total, 39 families gave consent for their child/children to participate in this study.
The students in both classrooms differ in their perception of whether they are given opportunities to play each day in kindergarten. The students in Classroom A hold varying opinions, ranging from, “of course we do” to “(a)ctually, we don’t play in our classroom.” Students in Classroom B share, without exception, that “we play a lot.” Although students in both classrooms maintain that they are given opportunities to play both inside the classroom and outside on the playground, the ways in which they experience play are quite different. The students in Classroom A identify that their primary play opportunities occur during teacher-directed learning centers such as dramatic play center, block center, and playdough center. Teacher A directs them to specific, timed learning centers, with a teacher-selected and consistent group of children. The students in Classroom B share that the play opportunities in their classroom are open-ended as they are able to “pick whatever (they) want to do” and that the teacher does not make decisions about what, where, or whom they play with; “we decide for ourselves.” Outdoor play, or recess is experienced in similar styles between the two classrooms. The students in each classroom maintained that sliding, swinging, and playing tag were common occurrences on the playground.

The students in each classroom experience a number of types of play throughout the day in kindergarten. In Classroom A, children self-report experiences that coincide with large motor play, construction play, and symbolic and make-believe play. Other types of play, such as small motor and sensory play, though observed, were not identified by the students as relating to how they specifically experienced play in the classroom. The students in Classroom B described a multitude of types of play to describe their
experiences. Large and small motor play, rules-based play, imaginative and symbolic play, construction play, and playing with the arts and sensory play were all described as ways play is experienced in Classroom B.

Students in both classrooms maintain that play is a component of their day in kindergarten, although how they experience it is vastly different. In short, the students in Classroom A experience play through a high level of structure, teacher-dictated rules and learning centers. The students in Classroom B experience play through open-ended, student-selected experiences that are guided by safety-rules such as “be nice to others…be safe in the classroom,” and not teacher-dictated rules about how or what they may play.

Beliefs and perceptions about play are evident as students share their perspectives about play. Students in both classrooms overwhelmingly describe play as “fun” and as being an open-ended activity that allows them to make decisions about both what they play and how they play, as shared by a student in Classroom A; “you can play with the things you want to play with!” Students in Classroom A share that they know they are playing when “I decided what to build,” while students in Classroom B state that they have the freedom to “choose something different every time if I want” and “there is no wrong way to play.” These overlapping beliefs, represented by each class, align with Rubin’s (1983) characteristics of play, supporting the premise that play is intrinsically motivating, controlled by the players, process oriented, non-literal, free of externally dictated rules, and actively engaging.
The students in each classroom spoke of the numerous benefits of play. Students from both classrooms shared that learning occurs during play, however, students in Classroom A only recognized learning in three of the four major learning domains (intellectual, emotional and social) while they are engaged in what they perceive to be play-based activities. The students in classroom B, however, shared that learning occurs in each of the four domains (intellectual, emotional, social and physical) when they play.

The students in Classroom A and Classroom B articulated their perceptions of how work is experienced using similar narratives. Classroom A, for example, shared that work is a task that is teacher-directed through direct instruction; “It’s work cause (Teacher A) said to come do it.” Students in Classroom B supported this premise by stating, “we…work with my teacher.” Completing papers, working with letters and numbers, and learning to read and write were activities associated predominately with work in kindergarten. A vast difference occurs, however, when the students express how work is experienced in relation to play. Classroom A maintains that work is a separate activity from play and involves a predominately academic basis. In Classroom B, however, students perceive work to be embedded into their play experiences, stating that although (Teacher B) describes their morning routine as containing work and play, “I think she just calls it work and play…we don’t do a lot of work.” While students in Classroom B believe that work involves some product-oriented work, such as worksheets or other projects, they believe that play is still a component of the experience of work at school, citing their participation in play-based centers such as the housekeeping and painting centers during “work” times.
Work elicits different emotions from the children in each classroom, as well. Some of the students in Classroom A associate stress with the work they are expected to do in kindergarten; “I just keep messing up my work” and “my favorite thing to do in kindergarten is to do good, but I’m not doing good still.” Conversely, students in Classroom B share that they enjoy the work that they do in kindergarten because “it is fun and you can use your imagination.”

There are commonalities among the beliefs and perceptions held by the students in each class as it relates to work. Work in each classroom is described as being both product-oriented and teacher-directed or led; “Work is when you make stuff, or do stuff with the teacher.” Additionally, students in each class believe that work involves academic-based tasks that often involve “papers” and “learning.” Differences emerge in relation to the way children classify their feelings about work. Students in Classroom A believe that work is “boring” and something they must finish in order to participate in other activities. Students in Classroom B, however, overwhelmingly describe work as “fun” and something they enjoy.
Figure 6: Composite representation of students’ experience with play in the kindergarten classroom.

Beliefs and Perceptions About Play

How Play is Experienced

Beliefs and Perceptions About Work

How Work is Experienced
Chapter Five: Outcomes and Implications

This chapter presents the outcomes of the research study and implications of the findings as they relate to future research, practice, and policy. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the experience of play and play-based learning in two kindergarten classrooms. Students’ and teachers’ perceptions of play were examined, as well as how children experience play in the kindergarten classroom. The presence of play in the teaching practices and daily curriculum of these classrooms was also observed. This research attempted to answer the following questions:

1. How is play experienced inside the kindergarten classroom?
2. What are kindergarten students’ perceptions of play?
3. What are kindergarten teachers’ perceptions of play?

Outcomes

The outcomes of this study were determined through in-depth data analysis, utilizing the modification of the van Kamm method of phenomenological data (Moustakas, 1994). These outcomes are presented by research question, according to the themes that emerged during data analysis and then compared to the literature presented in chapter 2.

Question 1: How is play experienced inside the kindergarten classroom?

Teacher A perspective. Classroom A and Classroom B both incorporate play and play-based learning in the curriculum and experiences presented in their respective kindergarten classrooms. However, the ways in which play is experienced in the classrooms of Teacher A and Teacher B are significantly different from one another.
Teacher A maintains that she incorporates a total of approximately 60 minutes of both structured and unstructured play in her classroom each day. These play opportunities are experienced primarily through three specific activities during the course of a typical school day; teacher-directed learning centers, math tubs, and outdoor recess. Teacher A prepares five learning centers each day for the students, in predetermined groups of 4 each, to rotate through in 10-12 minute increments. Of these five centers, one 10-12 minute center is reserved as a play-based center and includes activities such as dramatic play, blocks, sensory table, or playdough. The remaining four centers are academic-based and teacher-directed and focus primarily on literacy and writing skills. Math tubs occur each afternoon during math instruction. Math tubs are bins of preselected math manipulatives that the children are able to self-select and use “any way they choose” in twenty-minute increments. A final play opportunity in Classroom A is outside recess. Outside recess typically occurs twice during the school day, 15 minutes in the morning and 30 minutes in the afternoon. Teacher A views play as a “break” from the academic expectations placed on students, and not necessarily as an opportunity to enhance learning or other skills, as she is unsure how to “make that happen.” Teacher A maintains that opportunities to play in the classroom have been reduced as academic and accountability expectations for students and teachers have increased in the past few years. An emphasis on standards-based curriculums, in combination with standardized measures of assessment and evaluations for both students and teachers have had the greatest impact on this change.
**Classroom A student perspective.** The students in Classroom A identify teacher-directed learning centers and outdoor recess as their primary opportunities to play while at school. Students agreed with Teacher A and cited that participating in centers, such as the dramatic play center, playdough center, and block center as their most prevalent play opportunities in the classroom. Outdoor recess was also classified as a major play experience. Not all students were in agreement, however, in regard to whether they are given opportunities to play each day in kindergarten. While the majority of students agreed that they played, in some form, every day, a number of students maintained “we don’t play in our classroom.”

Students in Classroom A experience a number of types of play throughout the course of a typical day at school. Large motor play, symbolic play, construction play, and make-believe play dominate the play experiences of the students. These types of play are consistent with findings in the literature by Feeney et al. (2013) and Miller & Almon (2009). Sensory and small motor play was observed during the research project, however the students did not identify them as types of play they experienced in kindergarten.

The students were also observed participating in both social and cognitive stages or categories of play. These categories of play behavior closely mirror social and cognitive development in children as shown by an evolution of play complexity and purpose (Feeney, et al., 2013). Mildred Parten (1932) categorized six stages of social play and found a correlation between the level of social play and maturity and I.Q. (Bernstorf, 2006). The students in Classroom A were observed participating in onlooker
play, solitary play, parallel play, and occasionally, associative play. The final stage, cooperative play, was not observed. Cognitive stages of play, as examined by Smilansky (1990) and Piaget (1962) consider how play supports cognitive development in children. The first two stages of Piaget’s cognitive stages of play were observed: practice or functional play and symbolic play. The stage of games with rules was not observed in Classroom A. Further, Smilansky’s cognitive stages of play, as adapted from Piaget’s cognitive stages, were also witnessed in Classroom A. Practice or functional play, constructive play and dramatic or sociodramatic play were observed. As with Piaget’s stages, Smilansky’s final stage, games with rules, was not observed. Finally, Vygotsky (1977) maintained that make-believe play was essential for the development of higher cognitive functioning. Elkonin (1978), a student of Vygotsky, expanded on his theories to develop specific levels of make-believe play, stating that only when the highest level of play is reached can higher mental functioning develop. Of the four levels developed by Elkonin, the students in Classroom A participated in only the first two levels of make-believe play.

**Teacher B perspective.** Conversely, Teacher B maintains that she incorporates approximately five hours and fifteen minutes of play, or her entire instructional day, into the typical kindergarten day. Play in Classroom B is experienced through less structured open-ended play opportunities in all areas of classroom instruction, including work and play time, morning meeting, literacy centers, math tubs, work jobs, and outside recess. During work and play time, all areas of the classroom are open for the children to freely explore; play dough center, easel, listening center, housekeeping, blocks, reading center,
manipulatives, sensory table, science center, writing center, post office, puppet theater, doll house, computer, and large Legos are but some of the areas open to the students. Students are encouraged to make open-ended and independent decisions about not only with whom they will play, but what and how they will play, as well. Morning Meeting, Work Jobs, math tubs, literacy center, and outdoor recess also incorporate elements of play into learning. Teacher B considers play to be an imperative pedagogy in her classroom, citing it as the most important way that children learn. Teacher B, while cognizant of the increased expectations placed on both teachers and students, refuses to sacrifice play in place of more didactic-based instruction.

Classroom B student perspective. The students in Classroom B classify play as being the predominant activity in which they participate in kindergarten. Every child interviewed indicates that play occurs each day at school and that, in fact, “we play a lot.” The students in Classroom B share that play is experienced in a variety of ways, including inside the classroom during work and play time, literacy centers, math tubs, and work jobs and outside on the playground. During these open-ended playtimes, students shared that they are able to independently select their own activities to pursue. Students maintain that their play is student-directed, as opposed to teacher-directed in nature as Teacher B does not decide what, where, or who they get to play, but rather, they are able to decide for themselves throughout the course of the day.

The students in Classroom B experience a number of types of play throughout the day at school. Examples of large motor play, small motor play, rules-based play, construction play, imaginative and symbolic play, playing with the arts and sensory play
were all articulated by the students and witnessed as types of play opportunities they experience in kindergarten (Feeney et al., 2013; Miller & Almon, 2009).

The students in Classroom B were also observed participating in both social and cognitive stages or categories of play. The social stages of play, as described by Parten (1932) were evident in Classroom B as the students participated in all levels of play as described in the literature; unoccupied behavior, onlooker play, solitary play, parallel play, associative play, and cooperative play. Cognitive stages of play, as examined by Smilansky (1990) and Piaget (1962) consider how play supports cognitive development in children. All three stages of Piaget’s cognitive stages of play were observed; practice or functional play, symbolic play, and the stage that promotes the highest level of cognitive functioning, games with rules. Further, Smilansky’s four cognitive stages of play, as adapted from Piaget’s cognitive stages, were also witnessed in Classroom B; practice or functional play, constructive play, dramatic or sociodramatic play and games with rules. Finally, Vygotsky’s (1977) theories of make-believe play, as expanded on by Elkonin (1978) were developed into four specific levels of make-believe play, stating that only when the highest level of play is reached can higher mental functioning develop. Of the four levels developed by Elkonin, the students in Classroom B participated in all levels of make-believe play, including level four, considered fully developed mature play.

**Question 2: What are kindergarten students’ perceptions of play?** Students in Classroom A and Classroom B hold strong perceptions about play. The students overwhelmingly describe play as “fun” and as being an open-ended activity that allows them to make decisions about both what they play and how they play. Further, play is
described as an activity that makes them feel “happy” and is something that they not only like to do, but that they are good at doing. These perceptions, shared by each class, align with Rubin’s (1983) characteristics of play, supporting the premise that play is intrinsically motivating, controlled by the players, process oriented, non-literal, free of externally dictated rules, and actively engaging.

The students in each classroom articulated many benefits of play. These benefits align with findings from previous studies and child development research (Almon, 2009; Gross & Sanderson, 2012; Hewes, 2006; Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002; Lauer, 2011, Levin, 2012). Students from both classrooms share that learning occurs during play in the four dominant learning domains (physical, intellectual, emotional, and social). However, students in Classroom A recognized learning in only three of the four major learning domains (intellectual, emotional and social), while students from Classroom B recognized that learning occurs in each of the four domains (intellectual, emotional, social, and physical) when they play.

While students shared their perceptions about play, the phenomena of “work” also became a focus of interest during the study. Students from both classrooms, for example, shared that work is a task that is teacher-directed through direct instruction. Academic-based tasks that produced “learning”, such as completing worksheets, working with letters and numbers, and learning to read and write were activities associated with work in kindergarten. Students’ perceptions are vastly different, however, when they express the relationship between work and play. Classroom A is adamant that work is an academic task that is separate from play. In Classroom B, however, students believe that
work is embedded into most, if not all, of their play experiences. Differences also emerge in relation to the way children classify their feelings about work. Students in Classroom A believe that work is “boring,” something at which they are not good, and something they must finish in order to participate in other activities. Students in Classroom B, however, overwhelmingly describe work as “fun” and something they enjoy. These outcomes are consistent with the research conducted by King (1979) Wing (1995), and Yan, Yuejuan, and Hongfen (2005) in which children describe work as a predominately different phenomena than play, as it is teacher-directed activity and related to a curricular goal.

**Question 3: What are kindergarten teachers’ perceptions of play?** The phenomena of play is perceived by both Teacher A and Teacher B as being an open-ended experience that promotes creative expression, critical thinking, problem-solving, and is an integral component in the socialization of children. Both teachers hold a positive perception of play and maintain that it is vitally important for young children, findings that are supported in the literature (Almon, 2013; Miller & Almon, 2009; Olsen & Sumison, 2000; Ranz-Smith, 2007). Teacher A, however, feels that increased expectations for both teachers and students hinders the opportunities she can devote to play in the classroom, as academic outcomes have become the primary focus. A study of 142 kindergarten teachers in Los Angeles, California had similar findings, stating that though play is important for learning and development, it is disappearing as an emphasis on academic-based instruction and outcomes has become a priority (Miller & Almon, 2009). A phenomenological study of four first grade teachers found similar results
(Ranz-Smith, 2007). This study found that all four teachers, though viewing play as valuable, felt that the emphasis on increased academic expectations limited its use in the classroom. Teacher B agrees that there has been a significant increase in academic expectations for kindergarten students, however, she maintains that play can and should be utilized as the primary pedagogy in kindergarten classrooms as all learning can occur through a play-based curriculum. Both teachers have concerns about providing developmentally appropriate play opportunities for children, however, Teacher B maintains that play is critical for student success and not something she is willing to sacrifice.

Teacher A and Teacher B subscribe to many of the same perceptions as they relate to kindergarten and its’ changing culture. Both teachers maintain that these changes directly influence how play is experienced in their classrooms. The most significant changes include the push down of academic expectations from subsequent grades, a shift that has turned kindergarten into the “new first grade” and increased, in their perception, inappropriate expectations that are placed on both students and teachers. Standardized measures of accountability as required by federal, state, and local mandates, have further added to the shift in the ever-changing culture of kindergarten. Both teachers express frustration, worry, and angst over this shift in culture and its impact on students, Teacher B remains steadfast in her belief about play as the foundation for all learning and Teacher A believes opportunities to play are lost as her focus has become about preparing her students for future academic success.
Teacher A and Teacher B would like to see a number of changes occur in kindergarten. They maintain that these changes would enhance the overall experience of kindergarten, and as a result, enhance the experience of play, as well. The most significant changes, and ones they maintain that would elicit the most positive impact for both students and teachers, include a de-emphasis on standardized testing and assessment and a return to developmentally appropriate, student-centered practice. Teacher A also cites that an increased emphasis on authentic assessment and a lower student-teacher ratio would also facilitate more positive and appropriate experiences for kindergarten students.

It can be inferred that Teacher A believes that she is preparing her students to be successful in the future, as they prepare for academic success through adherence to a standards-based curriculum dominated by an emphasis on direct instruction and academic outcomes. It can further be inferred that Teacher B believes that she is preparing her students to be successful today, as supported by her adherence to developmentally appropriate and play-based practices that consider the needs of the whole child.

Implications

**Future research.** Additional research should be continued on a broader scale specifically related to the further examination of kindergarten, developmentally appropriate practice, standards-based education, and teacher and student perceptions of play. As revealed though this initial, small scale phenomenological research study, we now have a more thorough understanding of two teachers’ perceptions of play and the factors that motivate them in classroom and curricular decision-making. I would encourage future research to examine the experience of play and teacher perspectives on
a broader scale, with emphasis on additional classrooms, across varying demographics. The findings of this research study, as with most qualitative studies, are not necessarily generalizable to a larger population. Though these findings align with the limited previous research investigating play in kindergarten (Almon, 2013; King, 1979; Miller & Almon, 2009; Olsen & Sumison, 2000; Ranz-Smith, 2007; Wing, 1995; Yan, Yuejuan, & Hongfen, 2005), it can be inferred that additional research would illicit more generalizable findings that could positively influence the field of early childhood and kindergarten, specifically. Research that considers the ways in which play influences academic outcomes would also be beneficial to the field. Longitudinal studies that follow students over the course of a kindergarten year, examining beginning of the year to end of year outcomes would lend to a greater understanding of the benefits of a play-based curricular emphasis versus a non-play-based emphasis as teachers implement required standards-based curricula. Additionally, studies focusing on comparative analysis that examine the growth and development of children, as well as outcomes on performance measures in classrooms of varying demographics are necessary. Play-based versus non-play-based classrooms, urban versus rural settings, and early in career teacher versus experienced teacher demographics would be areas of interest for future research.

**Practice.** Play is one of the most readily accepted and encouraged vehicles through which learning takes place in early childhood education (Levin, 2012). When children are given the opportunity to participate in authentic and meaningful play experiences, the benefits are endless. Play has a crucial role in the development and learning of children as they advance through physical, intellectual, emotional, and social
domains. In fact, participation in play has been cited as crucial for a child’s development and an important part of the kindergarten student’s school day (Miller & Almon, 2009).

Standards-based educational reform has impacted the experience of kindergarten for many children, especially as it relates to play. An emphasis on increased academic expectations, high-stakes testing and formal assessments, in addition to increased accountability measures for teachers has altered many of the perceptions teachers hold about balancing what is appropriate for kindergarten children and the increased expectations placed on them by federal, state, and local mandates (Almon, 2013; Graue, 2009; Miller & Almon, 2011). While many teachers purport to both know and understand the importance of play in the development of young children, play as pedagogy is not only waning, but often disappearing from many kindergarten classrooms (Almon, 2013).

Based upon the results of this study, as well as the results of similar studies related to the developmental appropriateness of play for children in preschool and kindergarten, I would encourage early childhood teachers and administrators to recognize the construct of play as the most effective pedagogical practice available for kindergarten children, in an effort to not only meet, but also exceed, the needs of the whole child in meaningful and authentic ways. This recognition will require teachers and administrators to reexamine and familiarize themselves with the vital relationship between play and learning and how to appropriately incorporate play into a standards-based curriculum. This can only happen when teachers feel empowered to employ best practices in their classrooms, with the support and guidance of both their colleagues and administrators.
This study found that while Teacher B is successful at implementing a play-based curriculum in her classroom, her knowledge is not shared with other teachers in her building. I would encourage schools to utilize the best practices of current teachers as a model through which to share knowledge and a deeper understanding of play-based and authentic learning, as reflected in the teaching methods and practices of classrooms achieving success through a play-based model.

I would further encourage an increase in both administrator and teacher professional development with an emphasis on the importance of a play-based curriculum and the development and implementation of developmentally appropriate curriculums that are specifically aligned to the Common Core State Standards. It is imperative that teachers have the knowledge and confidence to implement mandated standards in ways that respect the varying developmental needs of each child. Professional development must begin with the understanding that high academic standards do not have to be sacrificed for play as pedagogy in the classroom, but rather, academic standards can be enhanced as a holistic approach to developmentally appropriate learning is employed. Professional development aimed at exploring child development, play, developmentally appropriate practice, and the appropriate alignment and incorporation of CCSS would be imperative for teacher success. An outcome of this study supports this premise. Teacher A, although having both a Bachelor’s and Masters degree in early childhood, felt unprepared and lacking the necessary knowledge to use play as pedagogy, and further, how to successfully incorporate CCSS mandates through play-based practices.
The research of Trivette, Dust, Hamby, and O’Herin (2009) maintains that a common and often-heard complaint during in-service trainings is that teachers feel as though they are quickly given information and then left on their own with little support and no training on how to implement or follow-up. The outcomes of this study support this assertion, as both Teach A and Teacher B felt that although much was expected of them, little training or support was offered. I would encourage an ongoing commitment from administrators, teachers, and support staff that includes regularly scheduled and ongoing meetings, in-service training, and outside consultation from experts in the field. These trainings must encourage teachers to be reflective about their practice and urge them to continually question whether their teaching is meeting the needs of all students.

A final consideration as a result of this study is to encourage teachers to advocate for play and developmentally appropriate practices in their classrooms, schools, districts, and at the state level. This advocacy must begin with conversations aimed at educating both stakeholders and policy-makers about the importance of play in learning in kindergarten classrooms and the detrimental effect some of the previously employed mandates are having on the field of early childhood education. Teachers must be encouraged to communicate their opposition to current mandates, while educating those directly involved in decision-making that impacts kindergarten children on a daily basis. The proposition of moving towards a play-centered curriculum is not simply addressing the need to alter teaching style, but, in essence, to begin to alter the entire culture of what kindergarten has become.
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Appendix A: IRB Approval Letters

OHIO UNIVERSITY
Office of the Vice President for Research

A determination has been made that the following research study is exempt from IRB review because it involves:

Category 1: research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, involving normal educational practices.

Project Title: Play in Kindergarten: A Phenomenological Study

Primary Investigator: Angie M. Gibbs

Co-Investigator(s):

Advisor: Eugene Geist

Department: Teacher Education

Robin Stack, CI, Human Subjects Research Coordinator
Office of Research Compliance

July 17, 2014

The approval remains in effect provided the study is conducted exactly as described in your application for review. Any additions or modifications to the project must be approved (as an amendment) prior to implementation.
The amendment, detailed below, and submitted for the following research study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Ohio University.

Project: Play in Kindergarten: A Phenomenological Study

Amendment: Add Research Assistant (Wilson)

Primary Investigator: Angie M. Gibbs
Co-Investigator(s):

Advisor: Eugene Geist
(if applicable)

Department: Teacher Education

Rebeca G. Cale, AAB, CIP
Office of Research Compliance

10/28/14 Date
Appendix B: Teacher Interview Protocol

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol- Teachers

1. Tell me about your experience in Early Childhood Education.
2. How long have you been teaching?
3. What changes have you seen in kindergarten since you began teaching?
4. Why do you think these changes have occurred?
5. What is play?
6. What are your perceptions about play? In the classroom? On the playground?
7. What role does play have in your kindergarten classroom? Why do you hold these views?
8. What does play look like in your classroom? On the playground?
9. How do you utilize play in your teaching? Why?
10. Does your curriculum allow for play-based teaching? In what ways?
11. How do outside factors (parents, other teachers, administration, etc). influence your use of play in your teaching practices?
12. Do you feel supported to use play in your classroom? Why or why not?
Appendix C: Student Interview Protocol

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol - Students

1. What is play?
2. Do you like to play? Why or why not?
3. What do you like to play?
4. How do you know if you are playing?
5. When do you play?
6. What do you do when you play?
7. Do you play at school? When do you play at school? What do you play at school? How do you play at school?
8. Do you play at home? When do you play at home? What do you play at home? How do you play at home?
9. What can you learn when you play?
Appendix D: Ohio University Parental Consent Form(s)

Ohio University Parental Consent Form

Title of Research: The Culture of Play in Kindergarten Classrooms

Researchers: Angie M. Gibbs

You are being asked permission for your child to participate in research. For you to be able to decide whether you want your child to participate in this project, you should understand what the project is about, as well as the possible risks and benefits in order to make an informed decision. This process is known as informed consent. This form describes the purpose, procedures, possible benefits, and risks. It also explains how your child’s personal information will be used and protected. Once you have read this form and your questions about the study are answered, you will be asked to sign it. This will allow your child’s participation in this study. You should receive a copy of this document to take with you.

Explanation of Study

This study is being done because I would like to examine the culture of play and play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms. The public education system in the United States is undergoing the implementation of a standards-based educational reform that is more heavily reliant on standardized testing and teacher accountability. I would like to determine whether developmentally appropriate practices can and do exist within this new framework for kindergarten aged children.

If you agree to allow your child participate, your child will be asked to share with me their perceptions of play and how they play at school and at home during a series semi-structured open-ended interviews. These audio-taped interviews will take place in the classroom, during the course of a typical day of school. I will not interfere with the learning environment or daily curriculum of your child’s classroom. Your child will not be removed from the classroom and may refuse to participate at any time. Verbal assent will be requested from your child each time I both speak to and interact with them with questions such as; “May I join your play?; Can I ask you a few questions about play?; Would you like to talk to me today?”. This assent will be audio-taped at the beginning of each session. Boundaries will be respected and no child will be forced to
answer questions or participate if they are not willing or interested in doing so.

Your child’s participation in the study will last over the course of an 8-week time period, as I observe and interact with your child and your child’s teacher in their classroom. Participation in this study is completely optional. If you decide not to let your child participate, there will be no negative effect on your child. Participation may be discontinued at any time.

Risks and Discomforts

No risks or discomforts are anticipated as a result of participation in this study.

Benefits

This study is important to science/society for a number of reasons. It is my hope that this research will:

- Inform legislators, policy makers, and administrators of the importance of play and learning for kindergarten aged children.
- Garner information that will assist legislators and policy makers in the development of appropriate kindergarten standards and curriculum.
- Foster better understanding of the confluence of play and standards in an effort to assist early childhood educators in the development and implementation of developmentally appropriate curriculum for kindergarten children.
- Inform additional research in an area where little empirical research currently exists.

Your child may not benefit, personally by participating in this study.
Confidentiality and Records

Your child’s study information will be kept confidential. All interviews and observation data will be secured on my password-protected computer. All data will be destroyed at the completion of the study, in approximately one year. Your child will not be identified by name. Every effort will be made to ensure the data is unidentifiable.

Additionally, while every effort will be made to keep your child’s study-related information confidential, there may be circumstances where this information must be shared with:
* Federal agencies, for example the Office of Human Research Protections, whose responsibility is to protect human subjects in research;
* Representatives of Ohio University (OU), including the Institutional Review Board, a committee that oversees the research at OU;
Contact Information
If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact: Angie Gibbs, Primary Investigator, gibbsa2@ohio.edu, 740.525.7105 or Dr. Eugene Geist, Associate Professor, Ohio University, geist@ohio.edu, 740.593-2882

If you have any questions regarding your child’s rights as a research participant, please contact Jo Ellen Sherow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, (740)593-0664.

By signing below, you are agreeing that:
- you have read this consent form (or it has been read to you) and have been given the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered
- you have been informed of potential risks to your child and they have been explained to your satisfaction.
- you understand Ohio University has no funds set aside for any injuries your child might receive as a result of participating in this study
- you are 18 years of age or older
- your child’s participation in this research is completely voluntary
- your child may leave the study at any time. If your child decides to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to your child and he/she will not lose any benefits to which he/she is otherwise entitled.

Parent Signature____________________________

Date _______________________________________

Printed Name______________________________

Child's Name_______________________________

Version Date: 06/30/14
Appendix E: Ohio University Adult Consent Form(s)

Ohio University Consent Form

Title of Research:  Play in Kindergarten:  A Phenomenological Study

Researchers:  Angie M. Gibbs

You are being asked to participate in research. For you to be able to decide whether you want to participate in this project, you should understand what the project is about, as well as the possible risks and benefits in order to make an informed decision. This process is known as informed consent. This form describes the purpose, procedures, possible benefits, and risks. It also explains how your personal information will be used and protected. Once you have read this form and your questions about the study are answered, you will be asked to sign it. This will allow your participation in this study. You should receive a copy of this document to take with you.

**Explanation of Study**

This study is being done because I would like to examine the culture of play and play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms. The public education system in the United States is undergoing the implementation of a standards-based educational reform that is more heavily reliant on standardized testing and teacher accountability. I would like to determine whether developmentally appropriate practices can and do exist within this new framework for kindergarten aged children.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate in a one time semi-structured interview that will last approximately 90 minutes. Additionally, I will be conducting observations of your daily teaching practices, schedules and curriculum implementation over an approximately eight week time frame beginning in the fall of the 2014-2015 school year. These observations will not interfere with your daily teaching practices or classroom management.

Your participation in the study will last approximately 8 weeks.
Risks and Discomforts

No risks or discomforts are anticipated as a result of participation in this study.

Benefits

This study is important to science/society for a number of reasons. It is my hope that this research will:

- Inform legislators, policy makers, and administrators of the importance of play and learning.
- Garner information that will assist legislators and policy makers in the development of appropriate kindergarten standards and curriculum.
- Foster better understanding of the confluence of play and standards in an effort to assist early childhood educators in the development and implementation of developmentally appropriate curriculum for kindergarten children.
- Inform additional research in an area where little empirical research currently exists.

You may not benefit personally by participating in this study.

Confidentiality and Records

Your study information will be kept confidential. All data collected will be kept on the researcher’s password protected computer. All data will be destroyed once the study is completed. Participants will not be identified by name. Every effort will be made to ensure the data is unidentifiable.

Additionally, while every effort will be made to keep your study-related information confidential, there may be circumstances where this information must be shared with:

* Federal agencies, for example the Office of Human Research Protections, whose responsibility is to protect human subjects in research;
* Representatives of Ohio University (OU), including the Institutional Review Board, a committee that oversees the research at OU;
**Compensation**

No compensation will be provided for your participation in this study.

**Contact Information**

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact: Angie Gibbs, Primary Investigator, gibbsa2@ohio.edu, 740.525.7105 or Dr. Eugene Geist, Associate Professor, Ohio University, geist@ohio.edu, 740.593.2882

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Jo Ellen Sherow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, (740)593-0664.

By signing below, you are agreeing that:

- you have read this consent form (or it has been read to you) and have been given the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered
- you have been informed of potential risks and they have been explained to your satisfaction.
- you understand Ohio University has no funds set aside for any injuries you might receive as a result of participating in this study
- you are 18 years of age or older
- your participation in this research is completely voluntary
- you may leave the study at any time. If you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Signature________________________________________

Date______________________________________________

Printed Name_______________________________________

Version Date: 06/30/14