

TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES WITH INTEGRATING PLAY-BASED LEARNING INTO
STANDARDS-DRIVEN CURRICULUM: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Mary Beth Anderson Nugent

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe kindergarten teachers' experiences with integrating play-based learning into standards-based academic curriculum in a school district in South Carolina. Play-based learning experiences were defined as instances which allow children to engage in active, social learning experiences in classrooms. This study explored the question of how kindergarten teachers describe their experiences with integrating play-based learning experiences in their classrooms, the value of play in their classrooms, their role as the adult during play experiences, and the difficulties that they face in making instructional decisions. The theories guiding this study were Froebel's early childhood learning theory and Vygotsky's cognitive constructivist theory as they demonstrate the importance of providing play-based learning experiences for kindergarten children. The sample was gathered through a criterion sampling strategy where teachers from a school district in South Carolina were selected because they have experienced the phenomenon being studied. Data collection included interviews, a focus group, and artifact analysis. The data was transcribed and analyzed using memoing and coding to identify emerging themes. Five themes emerged: academic values resulting from play-based learning, functional values resulting from play-based learning, intentional instructional planning, classroom interactions as a key component, and difficulties with implementing play-based learning. The results of the study will provide information to educators about how to best support kindergarten teachers in their pedagogical decision making.

Keywords: play-based learning, kindergarten, early childhood education, curriculum

Dedication

This work is dedicated to Emma Mackenzie. You are my biggest blessing in life, and I am so proud to be your mom. I am finally finished with having my own schoolwork to do, and the days of me having to spend what seemed like endless time on my computer are over. You have been so patient and supportive of me throughout this process. Thank you for the sacrifices that you have made so that I could achieve this goal. I hope that by watching me complete this milestone you also learn that you can do anything in life that you set your mind to. Set your goals high and never give up on them. I love you more than you could ever know.

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List of Abbreviations

Common Core State Standards (CCSS)

Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Supplemental Nutrition Aid Program (SNAP)

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Kindergarten teachers have many pedagogical decisions to make daily, including the importance that they place on play-based learning experiences in classrooms where they are increasingly encouraged to focus heavily on higher academic expectations for their students because of the implementation of state academic standards. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe kindergarten teachers' experiences with integrating play-based learning into standards-based academic expectations in a school district in South Carolina. In this chapter, the research background as well as the researcher's situation within the study are described. In addition, multiple components of the study including the problem, purpose, significance of the study, research questions, research plan, delimitations, and limitations are explained.

Background

Historical

Expectations for kindergarten children have changed over time. Therefore, teachers in early childhood classrooms must make decisions about the best instructional methods to use to provide developmentally appropriate, meaningful learning experiences for their students while meeting academic requirements that result from the implementation of academic learning standards (Izumi-Taylor, Samuelsson, & Rogers, 2010; Kim, 2011; Nitecki & Chung, 2013). The utilization of play-based learning is one instructional strategy that has widely been considered a component of best practices in early childhood classrooms (Hyoven, 2011; Nitecki & Chung, 2013). However, as kindergarten has changed over time, the presence of play-based learning has also changed.

Students are the largest beneficiaries when teachers make quality decisions about classroom practices. Further, teachers play a pivotal role in providing authentic experiences (Hope-Southcott, 2013; Lynch, 2014). Research has shown many advantages for students who engage in play-based learning experiences including increased language capabilities, greater symbolic thinking abilities, and social benefits (Fiorelli & Russ, 2012; Hyoven, 2011; Weisberg, Zosh, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2013). In addition to teacher-directed play experiences, students who are provided with time for child-initiated free play demonstrate procedural and conceptual knowledge development as they use playful learning experiences to create meaning about the world around them (Bulunuz, 2013; Hyoven, 2011). Children develop new competencies through free play regarding mental processes and skills that improve reading, writing, and storytelling skills (Nicolopoulou & Ilgaz, 2013; Roskos & Christie, 2011; Roskos & Christie, 2013). Nevertheless, research indicates that a gap exists between theory and practice, which is possibly due in part to the pressure that kindergarten teachers feel to provide more rigorous academic experiences for their young students (Bulunuz, 2013).

Social

Play-based learning refers to classroom experiences which integrate active, social learning experiences with meaningful content. Play-based learning can occur through both teacher-directed and student-directed play experiences (Roskos & Christie, 2011). State standards provide mandates about content that must be covered to meet academic requirements. Instructional strategies are not mandated by state standards, and therefore teachers must make decisions about methods that will be most effective for covering all required content. Difficulty sometimes arises when teachers become so focused on covering content that they abandon developmentally appropriate strategies such as play-based learning (Bulunuz, 2013). Although

school districts are bound by certain requirements, they must consider the best ways to support teachers in utilizing best practices when increasingly stringent academic expectations may make it difficult to maintain those practices as a priority (Hatcher, Nuner, & Paulsel, 2012; Ljung-Djarf & Olander, 2012).

Theoretical

There is a gap in the literature in relation to the specific experiences of kindergarten teachers in regards to integrating play-based learning into their classrooms. Theory supports play-based learning experiences for young children, but research indicates that direct instruction is increasing in early childhood classrooms (De Hann, Elbers, & Leseman, 2014; Nitecki & Chung, 2013). However, research does not provide an understanding of the experiences of the kindergarten teachers as they seek to maintain time for play-based learning while ensuring that they are covering all content required by state standards.

This research aimed to provide new insight into the experiences of kindergarten teachers who are making instructional decisions that impact student learning. School districts could use the information from this study to determine the best strategies for supporting early childhood teachers in their classrooms. Teachers can use the research to gain new insight into the experiences of their peers and to identify the impact that information may have on their own beliefs about their classroom practices. This study provides information to educators about how to best support kindergarten teachers so that they can bridge the gap that can exist between research and practice in relation to play-based learning.

Situation to Self

I had both personal and professional motivations for conducting this study. Professionally speaking, I wanted to conduct this study to learn new information that could

positively impact students in my classroom as well as other kindergarten students and teachers. It is important for me as an early childhood educator to advocate for best practices in kindergarten classrooms. I was also interested in this study because early childhood education has long been a personal passion of mine. A strong educational foundation which results from quality early childhood experiences is extremely powerful. Throughout my career, I have worked, and plan to continue to work, in positions where I can positively impact educational experiences for young children. The district that was used for the study is adjacent to the county where I live and teach. I do not have any relationship with the research site or the participants, which minimized potential biases in the research.

This research was conducted based on an ontological philosophical assumption. I gathered data based on a variety of viewpoints. The ontological assumption implies that I was looking for themes to report in my data based on what developed from the different experiences that my participants shared during the data collection process (Creswell, 2013). The group of participants provided a variety of experiences with the phenomenon which was analyzed into the themes that emerged. A social constructivist paradigm was also used for this research. Individual experiences were shared as the data was collected, and those multiple realities were used to construct the meaning from the research (Creswell, 2013). The reality of the themes was constructed based on the data gathered from various participants' experiences. The ontological philosophical assumption and the social constructivist paradigm shaped how I conducted my research and analyzed the data that was gathered.

Problem Statement

In educational research, many studies have been done on the benefits of play for young children (Fiorelli & Russ, 2012; Fleer, 2011; Hyoven, 2011; Nitecki & Chung, 2013; Roskos &

Christie, 2011; Weisberg et al., 2013). The problem was that qualitative research needed to be conducted to understand how kindergarten teachers describe their experiences with coping with increasing academic demands from academic learning standards while trying to continue to provide the play-based learning experiences that provide advantages for student growth. Recent studies reported by Fler (2011), Hyoven (2011), and Nitecki and Chung (2013) indicated that play-based learning experiences are critical for emergent literacy and cognitive growth in young children. Cognitive processes improve through the increased language development that comes from engaging with other students and teachers during play-based learning experiences (Fiorelli & Russ, 2012; Hyoven, 2011; Weisberg et al., 2013). Therefore, it is critical to ensure that these experiences are preserved.

It can be difficult for teachers to reserve time for play-based learning within their repertoire of instructional strategies because of the ever-increasing amount of content that young learners are now expected to master. Play is not always specifically included in academic learning standards, so teachers may sacrifice learning experiences which incorporate play in favor of direct instruction activities that they may deem to be more efficient in covering the academic content (Hatcher et al., 2012; Lynch, 2014). There is a balance that teachers must navigate when designing learning experiences in kindergarten classrooms to ensure that play-based learning experiences are protected while high academic expectations resulting from academic standards are being met (De Hann et al., 2014; Ljung-Djarj & Olander, 2012; Roskos & Christie, 2011). Play and learning are often separated in kindergarten classrooms, and the gap between research and practice can be wide (Bulunuz, 2013). Much research exists about the benefits of play in relation to learning for young children (Fiorelli & Russ, 2012; Fler, 2011; Hyoven, 2011; Nitecki & Chung, 2013; Roskos & Christie, 2011; Weisberg et al., 2013).

However, there is a problem with the lack of qualitative phenomenological research designed to give voice to the teachers' experiences with integrating play-based learning into instruction in kindergarten classrooms which are bound by requirements from academic learning standards.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe kindergarten teachers' experiences with integrating play-based learning into standards-based academic curriculum in a school district in South Carolina. Play-based learning experiences were generally defined as instances which allow children to engage in active, social learning experiences in classrooms (Roskos & Christie, 2011). The theories guiding this study were Froebel's (1896) early childhood learning theory and Vygotsky's (1978) cognitive constructivist theory as they demonstrate the importance of providing play-based learning experiences for kindergarten children (Froebel, 1896; Vygotsky, 1978).

Significance of the Study

Extensive research has been conducted about the benefits of play-based learning experiences for children in early childhood classrooms (Fiorelli & Russ, 2012; Nitecki & Chung, 2013; Roskos & Christie, 2011; Weisberg et al., 2013). Studies have also been completed which demonstrate that there is often a gap between what research shows as best practice and what happens in classrooms (Bulunuz, 2013; Hatcher et al., 2012). While there has been much research about play-based learning experiences, this study provided new insight into how increases in academic expectations for young children have affected the presence of those experiences in classrooms (De Hann et al., 2014; Lynch, 2014; Nitecki & Chung, 2013). This study provided understanding about why those gaps may exist based on providing a greater

understanding of how teachers described their experiences with play-based learning in their classrooms.

This study was practically significant because it provided insight into the experiences of teachers as they made instructional decisions for their students. As educational leaders look closely at practices within kindergarten classrooms, this research could help them to determine how better to support teachers. It may help leaders in education to understand why certain practices are occurring in classrooms and why other practices may be missing. To date, the research has focused on benefits for students, but it has been lacking in relation to teachers' experiences. This study has empirical significance because it added to the research where a gap exists. This research helped make connections between what is happening in classrooms and the reasons that it may be happening based on the experiences of the kindergarten teachers. Theoretically, this study was significant because it built upon the practical significance and implementation of theories already articulated by Vygotsky (1978) and Froebel (1896).

Research Questions

Based on the purpose of this study, the following questions framed the research:

RQ1: How do select kindergarten teachers in a South Carolina school district describe their experiences integrating play-based learning experiences into their standards-driven curriculum?

Play-based learning experiences are a key component of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) with young children (Nitecki & Chung, 2013). However, based on the gap that exists between theory and practice (Bulunuz, 2013; Lynch, 2014), some teachers choose not to implement such experiences in their classrooms. Although certified early childhood teachers generally have an understanding that play is important for young children's social development,

all teachers may not understand the wide array of potential benefits of play-based learning experiences for children in areas of development in addition to social skills (Gopnik & Walker, 2013; Nitecki & Chung, 2013). Teachers must make decisions about how much, if at all, it is appropriate to integrate those experiences into their classrooms. This decision making may be based on the teachers' understanding of many factors, including the academic and developmental needs of their young students. The teachers' experiences with these factors can provide a unique perspective about instructional practices in kindergarten classrooms.

RQ2: How do participants describe the value of play in kindergarten classrooms which are driven by standards-based curriculum?

There are many benefits of play-based learning experiences that have been demonstrated repeatedly through research. Oral language, symbolic thinking, and cognitive thinking skills all improve through play-based learning (Fiorelli & Russ, 2012; Fler, 2011; Roskos & Christie, 2011; Weisberg et al., 2013). Additionally, children experience social benefits through the language interactions they have with their peers and teachers during play-based learning experiences (Weisberg et al., 2013). Likewise, child-initiated free play activities provide students with opportunities for development and growth toward meeting learning goals that are established through the implementation of state standards (Roskos & Christie, 2011; Roskos & Christie, 2013). All teachers may not share the same view of the benefits of play-based learning in classrooms and may not place the same value on the practice of implementing play-based learning. Gaining a clearer understanding of the priority that teachers place on play-based learning can provide an important addition to the literature.

RQ3: What are participants' descriptions of their role as the guiding adult in relation to student learning experiences in classrooms which are driven by standards-based curriculum?

Research shows that teachers play a critical role in fostering meaningful play-based learning experiences (Bulunuz, 2013; Hyoven, 2011; Lynch, 2014; Ridgway & Quinones, 2012). Teachers have different experiences with play-based learning in their classrooms, including their understanding of their own roles as the adults in those play-based learning experiences. Teachers' perceptions of those adult roles impact the experiences of the children (Hope-Southcott, 2013; Izumi-Taylor et al., 2010). One of the advantages of play-based learning experiences is the growth in language acquisition. Children have improved language skills when they have play-based learning experiences with attentive, responsive adults as well as their peers (Dickinson & Porche, 2011; Weisberg et al., 2013). Understanding the ways that kindergarten teachers describe their role in the classroom can provide important insight into the phenomenon.

RQ4: What challenges do participants face in making instructional decisions to meet the academic requirements resulting from standards-based curriculum while maintaining developmentally appropriate practice?

Kindergarten expectations have changed in recent years, with ever increasing academic demands and pressures placed on teachers because of academic learning standards being implemented (Ljung-Djarf & Olander, 2012; Lynch, 2014). Teachers are required to cover academic learning standards, and those standards tend to become the focus in classrooms. Since engagement in play is sometimes not an explicit requirement in state standards, time for play can frequently be sacrificed in place of other instructional strategies that teachers may deem more efficient for covering content (Hatcher et al., 2012). Although there are many known benefits for

children who engage in play-based learning experiences, direct instruction has increased in early childhood classrooms (De Hann et al., 2014; Nitecki & Chung, 2013), and the change in requirements for teachers can make pedagogical decision making difficult. A gap exists between theory and practice (Bulunuz, 2013; Lynch 2014); therefore, kindergarten teachers' voices need to be heard in relation to the difficulties that they may face in trying to successfully meet all the standards-based curricular requirements that have been placed upon them.

Definitions

1. *Academic learning standards* – Benchmarks for classroom learning at specific grade levels (Bulunuz, 2013).
2. *Best practice* – Teaching practices which are considered most effective for a specific group of learners (Dockett, 1998).
3. *Developmentally appropriate practice* – A broad concept which describes pedagogical practices which consider the age, individual characteristics, social, and cultural context of students (Kim, 2011).
4. *Direct instruction*- Learning activities which are teacher directed and typically involve skills practice (Reyes, 2010).
5. *Play-based learning* – Experiences which provide children with meaningful learning which is embedded into play experiences (Roskos & Christie, 2011).
6. *Scaffolding* – A teacher or more capable peer provides support to aid a child in accomplishing a task that could not be completed without assistance (Wang & Hung, 2010).

7. *Standards-driven curriculum* – Instruction that is based upon the standards that have been identified as the essential content to be covered each school year (Nitecki & Chung, 2013).
8. *Zone of Proximal Development* – The stage between a student’s ability to operate independently and the level that he or she can reach with appropriate adult support or assistance from a more capable peer (Rains, Kelly, & Durham, 2008).

Summary

An increased focus on academic standards in kindergarten classrooms has impacted many teachers’ pedagogical decision making in relation to the integration of play-based learning experiences. Based on the literature, the problem was identified as a lack of research in relation to teachers’ experiences with integrating play-based learning experiences into kindergarten classrooms. This study sought to understand those experiences and therefore provide information to educators about how kindergarten teachers can be supported most effectively in their pedagogical decision making. The research background, problem, purpose, significance, questions, plan, delimitations, and limitations are all important components which have been explained in this chapter for this study.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Play-based learning experiences for young children have been studied repeatedly, although there are varying views on the most appropriate practices to use with young children. Vygotsky (1978) is one theorist who promoted the use of play-based experiences in early childhood education. In addition, Froebel (1896) advocated for the use of play-based experiences in his principles of quality practices for teaching young children. Research demonstrates a variety of benefits for young children when they engage in play experiences in their classrooms (Fiorelli & Russ, 2012; Nitecki & Chung, 2013; Roskos & Christie, 2011; Weisberg et al., 2013). However, with increasing academic requirements for teachers of young children because of the implementation of more stringent academic learning standards, teachers may find it difficult to maintain a developmentally appropriate balance between play-based experiences and direct instruction (Ljung-Djarf & Olander, 2012; Lynch, 2014). In this chapter, the theoretical framework and a synthesis of related literature provide background for the research and the gap that has been identified in the literature.

Theoretical Framework

Early childhood is a unique time in a child's life, and the educational practices in early childhood classrooms are guided by many theories which account for the developmental needs of young children. Vygotsky's (1978) theory of cognitive constructivism and Froebel's (1896) theory about early childhood education both provided a basis for the importance of offering opportunities for children to engage in play-based learning experiences. These two theories provided the theoretical foundation for this research.

Vygotsky

Vygotsky's (1978) theory of cognitive constructivism supports the use of play-based learning experiences in classrooms. Vygotsky asserts that it is critical for children to interact with their surroundings to make sense of their world and construct their own knowledge (Collum, 2012). Play experiences provide children with opportunities to interact with their environments and the materials that serve as their stimulus during learning activities. These experiences allow children "to exceed the bounds of the immediate stimulus and thus to learn to use symbolic, abstract levels of thought" (Morrow & Rand, 1991, p. 397). Through play experiences, children can expand beyond the immediate experiences they have to deepen their levels of thinking. Based on Vygotsky's constructivist theory, learning is not gained through mechanical tasks or rote teaching. Instead, learners gain new understandings when they have opportunities to participate in learning activities within an environment that provides for instructional experiences where knowledge can be constructed (Liu & Matthews, 2005).

Children grow and develop because of social interactions instead of through specific stages (Rains et al., 2008). As children gain new understandings and abilities, they are functioning within their zone of proximal development (ZPD). The ZPD is the level of performance which falls between a student's ability to operate independently and the level that the child can reach with appropriate adult support or assistance from more capable peers (Rains et al., 2008). Chaiklin (2003) defined the ZPD as "those intellectual actions and mental functions that a child is able to use in interaction, where independent performance is inadequate" (p. 9). The interaction with others is the important consideration when determining activities that fall within a student's ZPD. When students are completing tasks within their ZPD, they are working on a task which is too difficult to complete alone, but simple enough to accomplish with

support from an adult or more capable peer (Collum, 2012; Vygotsky, 2011). Working in this range allows students to progress through to new learning at a rate that is manageable for meaningful learning to occur. Pretend play experiences provide a means for this developmental change to occur as children work together to complete tasks that they could not complete without the scaffolding that results from interactions with more capable peers (Roskos & Christie, 2013). These experiences provide an avenue for the development of mental processes and skills which are predecessors for learning to read and write (Roskos & Christie, 2013). According to Vygotsky (1978), performance can precede competence. In other words, the tasks that students can perform today with assistance will become tasks that are performed proficiently on an independent level later (Rains et al., 2008). Transitions through the ZPD are different for each child and cannot be defined by concrete stages.

Cognitive constructivism supports the importance of social interactions that occur during play experiences. Children are active participants in society and their own learning, and therefore their learning is shaped by sociocultural factors (Wu, 2015). These sociocultural factors should be considered when designing learning experiences. In addition, the presence and active participation of an adult is an important component for children who are learning in constructivist based classrooms. Children who have opportunities to interact with adults or more capable peers in a social environment can develop higher psychological processes (Morrow & Rand, 1991). Children make cognitive gains by listening to language around them during social interactions (Figueroa-Sanchez, 2008). Teachers should be intentional about planning opportunities for language rich experiences for students.

Vygotsky (1978) emphasized the importance of scaffolding, which allows teachers to provide greater support initially with new skills or content and then slowly reduce the level of

adult support provided for the student (Collum, 2012). When instruction is scaffolded for a child, a teacher or more capable peer provides support to enable the child to complete a task that could not be completed without assistance (Wang & Hung, 2010). Children can gradually gain a sense of independence with new concepts when teachers scaffold them through learning experiences. For children's instruction to be scaffolded so they can continually work within their ZPD, the teacher must be vigilant to observe student progress and development with new content or skills (Vygotsky, 2011). Through observation, teachers should determine when, how, and to what extent each child needs assistance. The teacher ought to become attentive to facilitate learning by creating conditions which are conducive for increased independence with learning and development (Wang & Hung, 2010).

Other than academic implications, there are other benefits for children who participate in play-based learning experiences. Bergen and Davis (2011) pointed out, "Vygotsky suggested that children's play has the power to influence their moral emotions (guilt, empathy), behaviors (sharing, self-regulation), and reasoning (distributive justice)" (p. 81). These characteristics are not directly related to academic learning, but they do comprise a portion of the development that occurs as young children move through school. This development of moral behaviors has benefits that last into adulthood (Bergen & Davis, 2011). Play involves imaginary situations, defined roles, implicit rules, and language scripts. These characteristics of play encourage children's development in controlling their behaviors, self-regulation, and self-reflection (Bergen & Davis, 2011). Based on Vygotsky's cognitive constructivist theory, students benefit from play in the classroom because they can make academic and developmental gains when they can participate in play-based learning experiences where they are being scaffolded by skilled teachers who provide learning activities within their ZPD.

Froebel

Froebel's theories about early childhood education also support the use of play-based learning experiences with young children (Froebel, 1896; Froebel, 2003; Palmer, 2001; Wolfe, 2000). As Froebel developed his theory, he was driven by the desire to define the purpose of education (Manning, 2005). His theory was based around three main ideas. One of the three main ideas of Froebel's philosophy was a focus on the educational value of play (Froebel, 2003; Manning, 2005; Sniegowski, 1994). Children progress through many stages of development, but Froebel argued that play is the most important component in the spontaneous development of a child (Sniegowski, 1994). Due to the variety of advances that children can make through engaging in play experiences, Froebel placed a higher priority on play than any other phase of normal child development. He maintained that play is a child's method for working and growing; therefore, vitality and excitement about learning is heightened through play experiences at school (Froebel, 2003; Manning, 2005).

Froebel emphasized the importance of providing activities which allow the child to progress through learning with increasing difficulty. A large degree of autonomy should be allowed within clearly defined boundaries (Hewes, 2005). Children learn and problem solve as they manipulate objects and learn about the results of their interactions with objects (Reifel, 2011). Teachers need to become learners as well by observing the development of their students and adjusting their instruction accordingly (Reifel, 2011). Children can deepen their understanding as teachers question them based on the observations that they make while the children are playing (Polito, 1995). When teachers design the progression of learning activities strategically based on what they learn from observing, children can move from the solid to the abstract (Manning, 2005).

In Froebel's theory, the teacher plays a critical role as he or she guides students through learning experiences and assists as children seek to connect those experiences (Froebel, 1896; Froebel, 2003; Manning, 2005; Sniegowski, 1994). Play involves manipulating objects, and teachers have a responsibility to provide appropriate materials as well as to help students to construct meaning from the objects they manipulate. Teacher observation is an important component of Froebel's theory. Adults should be observers of children to learn more about their interests and the ways that they think, learn, grow, and develop (Reifel, 2011). Additionally, teachers need to be aware of the uniqueness in learning styles among their students and adjust their instruction based on those learning styles. Froebel believed that adult guidance is an important component of discovery and learning (Manning, 2005). Froebel placed emphasis on the importance of the child, utilizing natural interests, and providing play-based learning experiences as foundations for learning (Baader, 2004).

Related Literature

Play-based learning provides a myriad of benefits for young children, including both academic and social outcomes. There has been much research about these advantages as well as the other aspects of the impact of play-based learning, including the role of the teacher, the classroom environment, and outside factors such as academic learning standards. This section will provide a synthesis of the current literature about play-based learning and the influence that it has on children in early childhood classrooms.

Nature of Play

Play has many characteristics that make it unique in relation to other instructional practices. The presence of play-based learning in early childhood classrooms is a foundational tenet for young children as a part of Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) (Jacobs, 2014; Kim, 2011; Nitecki & Chung, 2013). For young children, play involves a process of learning and developing which encompasses cultural, emotional, social, and physical developments (Hyoven, 2011; Izumi-Taylor et al., 2010). Because of the many processes involved with play, many early childhood educators consider play to be children's work (Izumi-Taylor et al., 2010). There are several defining characteristics of play. It is voluntary, child led, not linked to survival, and does not involve a specific purpose (Hyoven, 2011; Weisberg et al., 2013). For children, play-based learning experiences are a source of enjoyment, joyfulness, happiness, or amusement (Izumi-Taylor et al., 2010). In addition, play is often exaggerated as children imitate actions and ideas that they are learning in the world around them (Weisberg et al., 2013). Play-based learning is a unique component of early childhood education because of the characteristics that define it.

Unlike other instructional strategies, play-based learning is just as much about the process as it is about the outcome. In addition to the intellectual, social, and emotional benefits, play-based learning experiences are independently enjoyable for children (Soundy, 2012). The motivation for the activity is embedded in the activity itself, and the activity is more important than the end goal (Bergen & Davis, 2011). Play-based learning activities value the means over the ends, and they are characterized by intrinsic motivation and self-initiation (Hyoven, 2011; Roskos & Christie, 2011). When engaging in play-based learning, students can control the activity, decide the meaning of the activity and change directions throughout the experience due to the nonliteral and dynamic nature of play (Bergen & Davis, 2011). Play provides a degree of

control for children that improves levels of student engagement. There is an array of non-academic skills that are developed for children because of the distinctive nature of play.

Play-based learning experiences involve six areas which are important for teachers to scaffold for their students as they develop over time. These six areas are: planning, developing roles, using props, giving time, developing appropriate language, and negotiating settings (Hope-Southcott, 2013). Teachers who effectively implement play as an instructional strategy in their classrooms are helping students to develop in these five areas. When teachers provide support for students in these tasks, the children are encouraged to think more independently, make choices and self-regulate (Nitecki & Chung, 2013). Because of the flexible nature of play-based learning, children can test roles, boundaries, and possibilities as well as take risks without real world consequences associated with their behavior.

There is no fear of failure when children play (Bergen & Davis, 2011; Hyoven, 2011). The learning that occurs during play can contribute both to procedural and conceptual knowledge, depending on the features of the play activity (Hyoven, 2011). Children create meaning for themselves about the world that surrounds them when they can have playful learning experiences (Bulunuz, 2013). Play-based learning provides children with opportunities to engage with their own learning in ways that other instructional strategies do not. There are many defining characteristics of play that make it crucial for the development of young children and a necessary element of DAP in kindergarten classrooms.

Cognitive Benefits

Teachers must design learning experiences for kindergarten students to account for the unique developmental needs of young children. Play is an important component in designing these learning experiences. While play is clearly not the only way that young children learn, it

has a vital role and is one of the most important ways that they learn (Izumi-Taylor et al., 2010; Wu, 2015). Play-based learning experiences allow children to access authentic learning in a way that incorporates their unique developmental needs differently than other instructional strategies. All domains of child development are promoted when children are actively engaged in learning experiences such as those allowed through the integration of play (Stuber, 2007). There are a variety of benefits that children receive when they can engage in play-based learning experiences in their classrooms.

Many times, play experiences in classrooms involve children engaging in pretend play with their classmates. When children engage in pretend play with their peers, those encounters help to develop a ZPD for children to demonstrate developmental change (Roskos & Christie, 2013). Vygotsky's (2011) constructivist theory promotes the importance of the ZPD for children where they are unable to complete a task alone, but are capable of successfully completing task with the help of an adult or more capable peer. During pretend play experiences, children can work together to complete tasks with more capable peers when needed. Literacy development improves through those pretend play learning experiences because students can develop new skills and mental processes which are needed for students to learn to read and write (Roskos & Christie, 2013).

Children who are exposed to meaningful pretend play learning experiences demonstrate improvement in other specific skills. When the play experiences are integrated with meaningful learning goals, the combination of pretend play and authentic learning encourage proactivity and flexibility (Hatcher et al., 2012; Hyoven, 2011; Lee & Goh, 2012). Through the play experiences, students learn how to adjust and change to successfully complete a task as their flexible thinking skills improve (Hope-Southcott, 2013). In addition, as students learn to work

together in play experiences, their ability to accept multiple points of view increases (Hope-Southcott, 2013). Children learn to listen to their peers and work together to solve problems or complete tasks, considering their own thoughts as well as the viewpoints of their classmates.

Increasing oral language skills provide students with a pathway to become more capable of expressing their own viewpoints as well as understanding the views of others. Free play and pretend play encourage the development of oral language skills (Roskos & Christie, 2013). Siraj-Blatchford (2009) wrote, “Play is widely recognized as a leading context for the child’s acquisition of communication and collaboration skills” (p. 80). Children develop language in multiple ways when they participate in play experiences. Developing oral language skills are an essential component of the foundation of early literacy skills. Play supports the development of linguistic skills which are prerequisite skills for children learning to read (Roskos & Christie, 2011; Roskos & Christie, 2013). Moreover, the narrative schemas that occur as students engage in pretend play have literacy benefits for young children. Future reading comprehension is improved for children who engage in narrative schemas during pretend play. Research has demonstrated that children who develop competence in pretend play narratives in turn transfer those developing skills to oral narratives which improves skills in storytelling, reading, and writing (Nicolopoulou & Ilgaz, 2013; Roskos & Christie, 2011). As students become more competent with pretend play narratives, those skills transfer over to academic literacy skills related to reading and writing.

There are a variety of cognitive and affective processes that are developed through play-based learning experiences in classrooms in addition to increased language capabilities (Fiorelli & Russ, 2012). Focused attention, self-regulation, and memory all increase through play-based learning experiences (Nitecki & Chung, 2013; Pyle & Bigelow, 2015). Those cognitive skills

are critical for all areas of a child's educational success. Self-regulation is important because it has two sides. First, children who learn to self-regulate can control their impulses to stop engaging in an activity that may not be appropriate at a certain time. The second part of self-regulation is developing a capacity to do something that is needed, even if one does not want to do it (Bodrova & Leong, 2008). Achieving one portion of self-regulation is not effective if both facets are not fully developed. Kindergarten students can learn self-regulation when they can participate in activities that are child directed. That is, activities are provided where children are setting, negotiating, and following the rules instead of adults making all the decisions. Play, particularly make-believe play, is an effective way to provide children with such experiences (Bodrova & Leong, 2008).

Engaging in play-based learning experiences improves a child's ability to organize cause and effect, generate ideas, and solve problems (Fiorelli & Russ, 2012). As children encounter difficulties or complications in their play experiences, they learn to conceptualize, reason, and solve problems (Hyoven, 2011). Students can develop possible solutions and attempt to solve problems using those solutions until they are successful. Play helps provide for children to have opportunities to take risks to find alternative solutions when problem solving. Bruner (1963) wrote the following:

In order to learn or solve problems, it is necessary that alternatives be explored and that you cannot have effective learning or problem solving without the learner's having the courage and the skill to explore alternative ways of dealing with a problem. (p. 526)

Play and creativity are also related, which improves performance on divergent thinking skills as students conceptualize and explore possible solutions to problems that they encounter (Fiorelli & Russ, 2012; Izumi-Taylor et al., 2010). Problem solving often requires creativity to formulate

and explore appropriate solutions. Strong problem solving skills are necessary for long term academic success. A variety of cognitive skills which are necessary to develop strong problem solving skills are all developed for children through engagement in play-based learning experiences.

Pretend play requires children to make distinctions between reality and fantasy. Distinguishing between imagination and reality in play prepares children to work with real objects and abstract ideas that represent reality (Fleer, 2011). When students use objects to represent other objects in a symbolic way, they are gaining practice with forming symbolic relationships (Fiorelli & Russ, 2012; Weisberg et al., 2013). This ability to understand symbolic ideas will translate into a greater ability to learn abstract or theoretical academic content and builds skills which help children to begin to contemplate theoretical knowledge (Fleer, 2011). Symbolic thinking develops through play as children engage in pretend play and make the transfer between reality and fantasy. Children engage in semiotic activity that precedes new learning as they make connections between pretend signs and real meanings during their play activities (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009). Utilizing symbolic thinking abilities by presenting things in a pretend world can increase a child's ability to handle increasingly complex cognitive tasks (Gopnik & Walker, 2013). Through play-based learning experiences, a student is able to make the transition from "doing, to imagining what he has done, and finally to symbolization" (Bruner, 1963, p. 530). Basing the learning of difficult or abstract concepts on a foundation which utilizes pretend play helps to scaffold instruction for students as they move toward learning increasingly abstract concepts and ideas.

Social Benefits

Children who engage in play-based learning experiences in their classroom also experience benefits in relation to their social development. Play-based learning is not a one-dimensional process. Learning through play is a cultural, emotional, social, cognitive, and physical process (Hyoven, 2011). As children interact with others during play experiences, they can learn more than just the academic content that is being integrated into the learning experience. Social skills develop through play that would not develop without it (Weisberg et al., 2013). Sociodramatic play specifically provides social benefits as children learn to relate to one another in a variety of roles which are dependent upon the dramatic theme being acted out. Pretend play has been correlated with social development, and sociodramatic experiences are “accompanied by expressions of positive emotionality, joy, persistence, and concentration” (Fein, 1981, p. 1102). Play gives children an opportunity to work together and learn about others in a way that would not be possible with other instructional strategies.

This integration of play is very important in kindergarten, as it is a key time for helping children to develop an understanding of themselves as social beings (Alvestad, 2011). Kindergarten is often the beginning of the formal educational experience for children, and transitioning to school successfully has implications for future school and social success. It is vitally important for students to begin with a solid foundation. Children need to feel secure and comfortable to achieve the emotional well-being that is necessary for them to be able to learn (Di Santo & Berman, 2012). Play-based learning experiences provide students with the chance to understand more about themselves and their peers, and therefore to begin to develop security and comfort within their school learning environment.

Investigating, exploring, discussing, and voicing opinions to their peers helps children learn to express their thoughts clearly as well as to develop their ability to perceive the way other people think (Lim, 2012). Young children may have difficulty with understanding viewpoints other than their own (McLennan, 2008). However, through play experiences, children begin to understand that people interpret events or objects differently. They may realize not only that their views may not be shared by others, but also that they may have to modify their perspectives at times (Dockett, 1998). A deeper understanding of the perspectives of others improves student growth in social skills as well as linguistic skills.

Language development advances more readily with the presence of play-based learning in classrooms. Children tend to use more complex language when they have opportunities for play. This increasingly complex language feeds both social interactions and language development (Weisberg et al., 2013). Additionally, relationships begin to form among students as they engage in play experiences together. Teachers who are vigilant and observant become aware of the relationships that children are developing with each other and how those relationships may improve learning outcomes (Hope-Southcott, 2013). Teachers may begin to utilize this knowledge to foster relationships among students to provide the most beneficial environment for student growth.

Children's Natural Interests

Regardless of the age of the student, meaningful learning only happens when students are engaged in their learning experiences. With young children, providing play-based experiences is one strategy to foster student engagement. When they play, students can make decisions and direct their own experiences in some ways. Play allows children to have some control over their learning experience, which makes them more engaged (Weisberg et al., 2013).

The short attention span of young children must also be considered when designing learning activities. Instructional endeavors are more engaging when they connect to what children already know or believe about the topic, since young children lose interest more quickly than their older counterparts (Ljung-Djarf & Olander, 2012). Tapping into the natural interests of students improves their ability to remain focused and on task. Those interactions are developed through the experiences that children have with their families, communities, and cultures. Families and communities have the primary influence in establishing and supporting students' interests (Hedges, Cullen, & Jordan, 2011). Teachers who capitalize on their students' natural interests encourage the motivation, effort, memory, and attention of their learners (Hedges et al., 2011). Planned and spontaneous interactions both explore ideas that provide information about children's interests which have been constructed through participation in everyday life experiences. Teachers who choose not to engage with their students' funds of knowledge are neglecting to integrate a major source of students' prior knowledge and experiences (Hedges et al., 2011). Ignoring past experiences puts students at a disadvantage as they approach learning tasks.

Incorporating natural interests into meaningful, authentic learning experiences provides a variety of benefits since children naturally have an interest in play. Children's active participation, motivation, and learning are increased through playful learning (Bulunuz, 2013). Play is ultimately a way that children can express their ideas and understanding of the activities and relationships that they are observing from those around them (Elkonin, 2005). The constructivist theory of learning incorporates the concept of scaffolding, where students are given more support initially in learning a new concept or skill (Vygotsky, 2011). As the student becomes more competent with the concept or skill, the support is slowly reduced and removed to

allow for independence with the newly learned content. Play is one strategy that teachers may use to scaffold instruction for students. Using pretend play as scaffolding support encourages children to remain engaged in authentic learning experiences, which allows them to apply prior knowledge as they move toward meaningful learning goals (Hatcher et al., 2012). In play experiences, the teacher can work closely with students to provide support for new learning before tapering off the support as independence is achieved in relation to the learning goal.

With young children, teachers must be consistently working to identify the natural interests of the children that they teach. Teachers need to be vigilant to accurately identify students' interests and effectively encourage and enhance those interests (Mawson, 2011). Talking to children about their learning helps educators to better understand how they can provide experiences that build on prior knowledge and student interests. As students work and play in the classroom, teachers must be attentive to observe how they interact with each other, the environment, and the learning materials that are provided (Hope-Southcott, 2013; Mawson, 2011). By observing these interactions, teachers can learn much about their students and be more readily able to accurately identify the interests of students that would keep them most engaged in the learning experiences.

Appropriate Learning Environments

The learning environment is a key component in supporting children's literacy growth. The physical environment within classrooms is often ignored, but manipulating that environment provides sizable benefits for students when adjustments are made to allow for play-based learning (Morrow & Rand, 1991). When planning learning experiences for students, teachers must consider the importance of the structure of the learning environment. Teachers have a responsibility to create environments that support and emphasize inquiry, curiosity, and

questioning (Gallenstein, 2005; Hope-Southcott, 2013). Learning experiences for children are more meaningful and effective when they are created within a quality learning environment. The physical environment of the classroom and the materials that are made available to children can influence voluntary literacy behaviors and are, therefore, essential for affecting literacy learning (Morrow & Rand, 1991). Concrete, real world resources are a necessary component in classrooms where children are expected to think critically about concrete, real world problems. Activities which allow children to use a variety of manipulatives and concrete materials promote talk.

Language development increases when children engage in conversation and hear language around them (Figueroa-Sanchez, 2008). Literacy behaviors among children increase when they work and play in literacy enriched classroom environments (Roskos & Christie, 2011). This can be accomplished using a variety of techniques. Students need to experience literacy and print materials in an assortment of ways. Playful literacy activity is stimulated through access to literacy objects and print (Roskos & Christie, 2013). When teachers provide literacy-rich materials for students, the students will naturally improve their literacy skills through their interactions with those play materials. Much of early literacy learning hinges on students' abilities to make meaning out of their environment. Playful learning helps children to create meaning about their surrounding world (Bulunuz, 2013). As they work together with their peers and teachers in play experiences, children develop a better understanding of their environment and the world around them, which is foundational for learning.

Literacy is often the focus when considering appropriate learning environments, however math and science are also very important. Teachers should make a wide array of materials available for students to explore and provide adequate time for students to interact with those

materials (Goldstein, 2008). Blocks should be readily available in kindergarten classrooms. Social-emotional, cognitive, and physical growth all result from play time with blocks (Hansel, 2015). Children can engage in dramatic play, develop a greater understanding of the function of objects and structures, and work on fine motor skills as they improve their hand eye coordination through the building of structures (Hansel, 2015). Children naturally enjoy block play, and the learning opportunities that come from blocks make them a crucial component in early childhood learning environments.

Developmentally appropriate learning environments provide young children with opportunities to use their hands, bodies, and minds to construct knowledge using concrete resources (Durham, 2015). Because the classroom environment has an influence on students and their learning, it can be a key component in helping teachers balance increasing academic demands with the developmental needs of young students. An authentic, engaging environment helps children to flourish through discovery, exploration, and their ability to make meaning from their experiences (McLennan, 2011). Children who have many opportunities to stimulate their senses and their imagination learn best (Haas & Ashman, 2014). Teachers must work to be mindful of the relationship that children have with their environment and how that impacts learning (Hope-Southcott, 2013). Therefore, it is necessary to consider that relationship when designing the learning environment.

Literacy activities increase when play environments are enriched with literacy related materials and experiences. In those environments, the role of the adult is also critical. Roskos and Christie (2013) wrote the following:

Literacy-enriched play areas in the play environment significantly increase the frequency of writing and reading behaviors that support print knowledge (combination of alphabetic

knowledge, concepts about print, early decoding) when literacy materials are curriculum related and adult support is available. (p. 92)

Print knowledge increases as students have access to literacy materials in conjunction with appropriate teacher assistance. Emergent and early literacy behaviors spontaneously occur when students participate in play experiences both at home and at school. These behaviors, which include language use, reading, and writing are more frequent and pronounced when students are working within supportive environments (Roskos & Christie, 2013). The classroom environment can be a critical component for ensuring that students become more inclined to participate in those natural behaviors that strengthen their literacy foundation.

Importance of Adult Interactions with Children

Constructivist learning theory is based on the idea that students construct their own knowledge through interactions with the environment (Vygotsky, 1978; Vygotsky, 2011). However, in constructivist learning environments, the role of the adult is still critical (Liu, Lin, Liou, Feng, & Hou, 2013). Adult guidance is a necessary component as students interact with their environment and seek to construct new knowledge and understanding (Lynch, 2014). Teachers can question students about their thinking and encourage them to share the learning experiences that they are having. These conversations strengthen the curricular connections for children (DeLuca & Hughes, 2014). Interactions with other people are an important element of constructivist learning experiences. One of the most important components of DAP is the need for interactions, which includes interactions with peers and adults (Figueroa-Sanchez, 2008; Kim, 2011). The interactions that students have with those around them improve their ability to gain new meaning about the world.

When children play without adult support, there are literacy benefits for young learners; however, adult interactions increase the advantages. As Hope-Southcott (2013) wrote, “Although play can help children learn to self-regulate, develop literacy and numeracy skills, and practice social skills, without adult guidance play’s full potential may not be met” (p. 42). Adults who strategically interact with their students in meaningful ways pave the way for students to demonstrate higher levels of growth. Risk taking may be more common when teachers are actively engaged because the presence of a teacher helps students to feel more comfortable in finding alternatives (Bruner, 1963). Teachers play a critical role in the successful implementation of any educational initiative or strategy, including play-based instruction (Lynch, 2014). A teacher’s role involves helping children to make meaning of their experiences and to focus on their thinking. Teachers must see the possibility for learning when children play (Bulunuz, 2013). The interactions that teachers have with their students enable them to be better equipped to support the learning in their classrooms.

Oftentimes, teachers do not understand the importance of their own role in play experiences. When teachers lack an understanding of the importance of their role in play, they tend not to interact with children as readily during play-based learning experiences. Unfortunately, pre-arranging activities and simply acting as an onlooker limits the teacher’s ability to tap into the full potential of learning that comes through play (Ridgway & Quinones, 2012). Teachers can gain much knowledge about their students’ interests and needs through the interactions that occur during play experiences. Teachers need to have the knowledge and skills necessary to identify the needs of their students based on how children are demonstrating their understandings through play (Hedges et al., 2011). Sustained interactions with children help teachers to support interest-based learning. As teachers gain a deeper awareness of their own

methods for interacting, they can improve the quality of those interactions even if they are not able to increase the length of them. Consequently, teachers can support, extend, and challenge the thinking and understanding of their students (Hedges et al., 2011). Student understanding is increased through quality interactions with adults.

Furthermore, those interactions provide teachers with an ability to scaffold learning and provide support. Hope-Southcott (2013) wrote, “When teachers intentionally plan for and support learning through play, play has the potential to extend the thinking of our youngest learners” (p. 41). It is important for early childhood teachers not to underestimate the importance of their role in learning experiences. The role of teachers involves designing playful learning processes, encouraging children as active participants in the classroom, and promoting fun, enjoyment, and creativity (Hyoven, 2011). Teachers should consider the multiple facets of their own role in providing meaningful play-based learning experiences for the students in their classroom each day.

Play provides teachers with critical information about children’s development and needs, which provides data about a starting point for promoting new learning for students (Hyoven, 2011). When teachers interact with students during play experiences, they can extend thinking by questioning, changing available materials, using prompts, and challenging students to think in new ways (Hope-Southcott, 2013). Teachers can make instructional decisions for children based on what they learn about those students during the interactions that they have during play-based learning experiences. Early childhood educators gain the most current knowledge about their students when they are willing to listen, observe children, and have a willingness to see and interpret what is observed (Bulunuz, 2013). Teachers can gain insight into the ways that students view themselves and the world by observing children as they play and interact with one another

(Binder, 2014). Based on what teachers learn about their students during these interactions, teachers have the responsibility to plan for learning opportunities where children develop relationships with learning materials, their environment, and each other that produce new ways of thinking (Hope-Southcott, 2013; Pyle & Bigelow, 2015). The new learning experiences are most effectively planned when they incorporate the new knowledge that teachers have gained through their observation and interactions with students during play-based learning experiences.

Language growth improves through play-based learning experiences, thus playful interactions with adults and peers help children's language to thrive (Weisberg et al., 2013). Children are naturally scaffolded through language development as they interact with adults and children around them. When adults are attentive and responsive during play-based learning experiences, language skills improve for students and language acquisition is fostered (Dickinson & Porche, 2011; Weisberg et al., 2013). Teachers can provide guided play experiences for students to provide a very effective language-learning environment. In guided play, the adult scaffolds student learning based on the leading of the child and the interests of the students (Weisberg et al., 2013). The adult can structure the play in a way that is most beneficial for a specific child or group of children based on knowledge about the students.

Teacher talk with students allows for personalized conversations which foster close teacher-child relationships. These close relationships help to improve emerging language and literacy skills which are related to academic success (Dickinson & Porche, 2011). The teacher seeks to get the child to think, reflect (think about their thinking), and verbalize for themselves. Teachers can use these conversations to gain a deeper understanding of students' metacognition and foster further explorations that may be most beneficial for improving learning outcomes (Bulunuz, 2013). Play-based learning is most beneficial for young children when presented by

teachers who understand their complex role in promoting student growth and making the learning experiences meaningful.

Increasing Academic Requirements

Academic requirements and accountability are continually increasing for young students (Rains et al., 2008). Academic learning standards continue to be implemented, which require teachers to meet gradually more rigorous learning expectations. Preschool and kindergarten teachers currently experience progressively intensifying pressure to prepare students for more rigorous academic demands in first grade, which makes it more difficult to support play-based teaching (Bulunuz, 2013; Lynch 2014). Students are expected to meet academic milestones in kindergarten that are more difficult than in previous generations, which becomes a struggle for some teachers. “Challenges in combining play with learning arise because the theories of play available to preschool teachers were not developed with a view toward increased demands for learning” (Ljung-Djarf & Olander, 2012, p. 80). There are theories that clearly support play-based learning experiences for encouraging development among early childhood students, including those of Vygotsky (1978) and Froebel (1896). However, many of those theories were originally developed in a time prior to the increased academic requirements for kindergarten.

Teacher-directed activities are becoming increasingly prevalent as there is a growing emphasis on academic requirements in preschool and kindergarten (De Hann et al., 2014; Ljung-Djarf & Olander, 2012; Nitecki & Chung, 2013; Reyes, 2010). There are increasing expectations that early childhood education will serve as an accelerator of children’s development to improve education for American students. Accountability is emphasized more frequently as teachers and students are both met with higher expectations (De Haan, Elbers, & Leseman, 2014). The assessments used in those accountability measures do not always converge with the ways that

children naturally make literacy gains (Spencer, 2011). Because of the pressures from these assessments, American teachers report feeling pressured to limit play and focus more on academic requirements (Izumi- Taylor et al., 2010). The assessment expectations negatively impact the presence of play-based learning for children.

Kindergarten teachers feel unable to implement play-based learning experiences into their classrooms because of the pressures to make certain that children are prepared for increasing academic expectations in higher grades (Lynch, 2014). Many teachers have difficulty understanding how to effectively and efficiently integrate play-based teaching and rigorous academic learning. McLennan (2011) described this difficulty when she wrote,

Teachers struggle to balance a creative, literacy-rich, play-based learning environment that encourages authentic exploration and collaboration with meeting required standards in curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Harmonizing the individual and collective needs and interests of young children while igniting a passion for learning is a challenge for teachers. (p. 107)

Young children have a variety of needs, and no two groups of students are exactly alike.

Although there are many similarities among kindergarten children, each class has specific needs that are unique to that group of children. It can be a daunting task for teachers to meet all the required academic tasks while simultaneously considering the overarching needs which are characteristic of young children, in addition to the specific needs of a certain group of children.

The discrepancy between play-based teaching and academically rigorous curriculum sometimes appears because “play and learning are often separated in schools, even in kindergarten classrooms” (Bulunuz, 2013, p. 228). Teachers do not always effectively implement an integrated curriculum which allows for the presence of both play-based

instructional strategies and authentic, meaningful academic learning which pushes children toward meeting the requirements that come from the implementation of academic standards. Forfeiting an emphasis on play in favor of a greater emphasis on traditional academic instructional strategies can be counterproductive. One study showed that when a school stressed academics too heavily for young children at the expense of play-based experiences, the students were less successful academically in later grades (DeMarie, 2010). The lack of play-based experiences proved to be detrimental to the students in the following years.

While this is not a simple problem, the answer lies in strategically integrating play and learning in early childhood classrooms. Students need opportunities to participate in self-directed, spontaneous play instead of having every moment of their day directed by an adult. It is important for teachers to consciously plan for those opportunities for play (McLennan, 2009). During other portions of the day, teachers should focus on providing intentionally planned teaching moments in addition to an allowance for naturally emerging intellectual development as a developmentally appropriate way to seek a balance when planning instruction for young children (Durham, 2015). Play and learning must also be combined in a purposeful way to include methods to assess learning (Ljung-Djarf & Olander, 2012). A focus on assessment is a critical aspect of academic accountability, so teachers must strategically utilize their time to allow for assessment to occur within the play-based learning experiences that are provided for children.

Including play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms is a complex situation for teachers. Hyoven (2011) summarized the goal: “The aim of playful teaching is to integrate play and curriculum by designing playful learning processes of orientation, play and elaboration where various learning environments are used and school subjects are integrated” (p. 77). To

meet the complex needs of young students, play and academic content must be integrated, not separated in both theory and practice. When play is joined effectively with instructional goals, it is highly supportive toward moving children through a progression toward learning more difficult ideas (Roskos & Christie, 2011). For this to occur, teachers need professional development to learn how to effectively integrate the many demands that are placed upon them.

While providing teachers with courses on the value of play is an important component, it is not enough to provide them with the necessary tools to combat an educational system that often pressures them to limit play in their classrooms (Lynch, 2014). Teachers understand the importance of play for their students, but they are faced with a myriad of difficult instructional decisions where they may feel some activity must be sacrificed (Hatcher et al., 2012; Lynch, 2014). Teachers need support to find meaningful strategies for meeting the responsibilities that are placed on them without forfeiting the inherent needs of their young students. Teachers are more likely to feel higher levels of job satisfaction and have a lower likelihood of burnout if they can maintain autonomy in their classrooms while being supported by administration (Dagli, 2012). Allowing teachers to make decisions about best practices for their students provides that autonomy in classrooms. Teachers will feel more confident to remain in the classroom if they feel supported.

Gap in Theory and Practice

There is a wide array of research which identifies a range of benefits for children who are exposed to play-based learning in their early childhood classrooms. However, there is a gap between theory about using play as an instructional strategy and the daily practice in early childhood classrooms (Bulunuz, 2013; Hatcher et al., 2012; Lynch, 2014). Despite the recognized benefits of play, children are not always afforded the opportunity to participate in

such experiences. Many teachers find themselves ignoring play-based learning options and instead using worksheets, skill activities, and other direct instructional methods to meet the external pressures being placed upon them (Reyes, 2010).

Even with the extensive research that has been conducted related to children's play, not much research has been completed about play in education (Hyoven, 2011). This lack of research about actual classroom play activities is rather surprising considering the amount of debate that has occurred about best educational practices for young children (De Hann et al., 2014). Early childhood research typically revolves around various aspects of student learning and development. Researchers often explore ideas about how to most effectively facilitate student development. However, there is a lack of research related to the ways that teachers specifically immerse themselves in children's play and encourage those experiences in their classrooms (Ridgway & Quinones, 2012). Ultimately, the students receive the most important advantages when teachers make quality decisions about instructional practices in their classrooms (Hope-Southcott, 2013). Therefore, more research needs to be conducted specifically about play-based learning in classrooms and how teachers perceive their role and the most effective ways to make pedagogical decisions for their students.

Teachers are clearly the key decision makers in determining what sorts of experiences are offered for children in their classrooms (Izumi-Taylor et al., 2010; Kim, 2011; Nitecki & Chung, 2013). As a result, children's experiences in classrooms are affected by teachers' perceptions about the importance of play-based learning (Izumi-Taylor et al., 2010; Pyle & Bigelow, 2015). A child's level of exposure to play-based learning experiences is dependent upon an individual teacher's philosophy about the value or importance of play-based learning. Educators make curricular decisions and choose whether to allow for play in their classrooms based at least

partially on their own conceptions of play and learning (Wu, 2015). The attitudes that teachers possess in relation to play in their classrooms impact the outlooks that children develop about play-based learning. The experiences that students have with play length, play arrangement, and curriculum focus have an impact on their ideas about the role of play in their own learning. Children's views generally align with what they experience within their classrooms (Wu, 2015). Through their pedagogical decision making, teachers are modeling for students what sort of connection may exist between play and learning within their classrooms.

Teachers' attitudes and policies about play vary greatly (Hyoven, 2011). This variation is dependent upon an assortment of factors. One study researched and compared the opinions of teachers in several countries in relation to their views on play in classrooms. The study showed that American teachers tend to think of play as being related to learning and development (Izumi-Taylor et al., 2010). In general, American teachers understand that students may show a large degree of development in many areas when they participate in play-based learning experiences and have a desire to preserve those experiences for their students. Teachers can meet their students' needs more effectively when they focus on planning learning experiences instead of focusing strictly on specific standards that they intend to cover. DeLuca and Hughes (2014) wrote, "Planning learning experiences, rather than planning for academic learning, aligns the developmental, standards-based, and academic frameworks of early primary education" (p. 456). Well-planned, quality learning experiences will naturally be effective when teachers are focused on the needs of their students.

However, that outlook about integrating play is not the same for all teachers. Some early childhood educators believe play and academic learning are incompatible because they believe play interferes with the learning and assessment required to cover the increased academic

standards (Lynch, 2014; Stuber, 2007). Those teachers do not understand the benefits developmentally appropriate play activities provide when they are strategically designed to address authentic learning goals (Gopnik & Walker, 2013; Nitecki & Chung, 2013). It is important for teachers to understand that academic standards which encourage children to develop problem solving abilities, the ability to draw conclusions, and communication skills can be taught through developmentally appropriate experiences, retaining the joy and enthusiasm that comes when young children are engaged in meaningful learning (Jacobs, 2014). The belief that standards must stifle instead of promote inspired teaching is in direct contradiction with research which has found play to be a critical component of programs for young children (Jacobs, 2014; Lynch, 2014). Planning for learning that allows children to meet academic standards does not require the elimination of play in kindergarten classrooms.

In addition, even for teachers who understand and value the benefits of play it is often challenging to preserve play-based learning in classrooms. Teachers find themselves having difficulty with balancing the variety of external demands being placed on them and their students (Hatcher et al., 2012; Ljung-Djarf & Olander, 2012; Lynch, 2014). Accountability is continually increasing, and teachers are often under immense pressure to meet progressively more difficult standards of achievement for their students while maintaining DAP in their classrooms. Many teachers struggle to balance what seems to be an opposing set of requirements when trying to meet developmental expectations in addition to academic expectations resulting from federal and state guidelines (Goldstein, 2008). The atmosphere of academic intensification in kindergarten has made instructional decision-making difficult for many teachers.

Assessment is a vital part of accountability, and early childhood teachers should ensure that in addition to instructional methods, assessments are also designed in a developmentally

appropriate manner. Research about assessments with young children is sparse, and therefore teachers have little guidance on designing assessments that are developmentally appropriate, yet meet accountability requirements (DeLuca & Hughes, 2014). For assessments for young children to be authentic, they should be integrated into play-based learning and classroom routines (DeLuca & Hughes, 2014). Observation is an important method for assessing young children. Observations can be completed both formally and informally to provide valuable information to teachers about their students' needs and appropriate instructional decisions to foster growth. Play-based learning provides teachers with optimal opportunities to conduct observations and gain new knowledge about their students personally, socially, and academically (DeLuca & Hughes, 2014).

Early childhood educators often feel that they are trapped in a hopeless situation where incorporating standards requires them to abandon their beliefs about developmentally appropriate instructional practices (Anderson, 2010). Aylor (2007) wrote, "Gone, too, is the excitement and enthusiasm of early childhood educators who know they are violating every principle of developmentally appropriate practice and best practice in reading instruction, yet feel powerless to change the situation" (p. 4). Teachers find themselves in a difficult situation when they know what is best for their students but feel unable to implement those best practices into their classrooms. However, it is important for teachers to be fervent in their efforts to meet all the demands that have been placed upon them. Teachers must make daily practical decisions that consider DAP in addition to academic guidelines resulting from the implementation of academic learning standards (Dockett, 1998).

In addition to the emphasis on standards and accountability that results from federal or state guidelines, parents often question whether play is a necessary component for academic

achievement (Hope-Southcott, 2013; Reyes, 2010). If instructional practices do not align with the expectations that parents have when their children enter school, a challenging situation may arise (Taleb, 2013). Parents do not always understand the relevance of play-based learning experiences in their children's early childhood classroom, and their lack of understanding adds another level of pressure on teachers. It is helpful for teachers to reach out to parents to learn more about the backgrounds of their students and to further engage parents in their children's classroom experiences. Children benefit when parental involvement increases because the knowledge gained from interacting with parents helps teachers to plan more effective instruction (Figueroa-Sanchez, 2008).

The pressures and seemingly conflicting needs within early childhood classrooms can be quite discouraging. However, despite the pressures that may exist, "Early childhood educators must commit to the ongoing work of developing practices that are responsive to all facets of DAP, even those that do not coexist easily, to ensure all children are well-prepared for successful academic futures" (Dockett, 1998, p. 259). Regardless of the many factors that may complicate instructional decision making, teachers have a responsibility to their young students to do what is best to provide a strong academic foundation during the early years of their education.

Even with many dynamics to consider, it is possible to strike a balance in early childhood classrooms to allow children to have exposure to a mixture of educational experiences which are academically rigorous while remaining developmentally appropriate (Ljung-Djarf & Olander, 2012; Pyle & Bigelow, 2015; Roskos & Christie, 2011). Students are more engaged and behavior problems tend to decrease with the addition of play-based learning experiences in early childhood classrooms (Stuber, 2007). Teachers must be vigilant to maintain an appropriate balance of time spent implementing various instructional methods. "An important condition for

effective early childhood education is the optimal allocation of time, with an alternation of teacher-managed academic activities and child-managed educational and play activities while loss of time is restricted to a minimum” (De Haan et al., 2014, p. 56). Teacher-managed and child-managed activities both have their place in early childhood classrooms. The key is to design them carefully and intentionally to integrate meaningful learning while recognizing the unique developmental needs of young students.

Summary

Research demonstrates a variety of benefits for children who engage in play-based learning experiences, including increased oral language, symbolic thinking abilities, social skills, and cognitive functioning (Fiorelli & Russ, 2012; Roskos & Christie, 2011; Weisberg et al., 2013). Vygotsky’s (1978) constructivist theory and Froebel’s (1896) kindergarten theory historically encouraged the use of play in early childhood classrooms. Adults and the play environment both play key roles in the play experiences (Bulunuz, 2013; Hyoven, 2011; Lynch, 2014; Ridgway & Quinones, 2012). Research also exists which shows that increasingly high academic demands from academic learning standards are making it more difficult for kindergarten teachers to maintain the presence of play-based learning experiences in their classrooms as direct instruction is becoming more prevalent (De Hann et al., 2014; Nitecki & Chung, 2013). This gap in theory and practice can be further studied by acknowledging how teachers describe their experiences with integrating play-based learning into kindergarten classrooms which are increasingly required to focus on academic standards. This can provide insight into how educators can ensure that students are making the required academic gains while participating in developmentally appropriate learning experiences. This chapter provided an

overview of the research and the gap identified in the literature by describing the theoretical framework and synthesizing related literature.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the phenomenon of kindergarten teachers' experiences with integrating play-based learning into standards-driven curriculum in a school district in South Carolina. An appropriate research design, varied data collection methods, and comprehensive data analysis methods are all necessary components to consider in planning the methodology. This hermeneutical phenomenological study incorporates interviews, a focus group, and artifact analysis as data collection strategies (van Manen, 1990). Data analysis using coding and memoing are appropriate analysis strategies for the design (Creswell, 2013). Trustworthiness and ethical issues are also critical components for ensuring the integrity of the study design (Creswell, 2013). In this chapter, the components of the methods for the study are described including the design, research questions, setting, participants, procedures, and the researcher's role. Additionally, the data collection methods, data analysis methods, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations are explained.

Design

This study used a hermeneutical phenomenological design, which seeks to explain the interpreted meaning of the lived experiences of individuals who have all experienced a common phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 1990). This design was appropriate because the study aimed to interpret and describe the lived experiences of a group of kindergarten teachers who have experienced the phenomenon of integrating play-based learning experiences into classrooms where they are required to meet rigorous academic requirements due to the implementation of academic learning standards. Phenomenology allows the researcher to understand an identified phenomenon by making meaning from data gathered from multiple

sources about experiences with a common phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). van Manen (1990) wrote, “Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences. Phenomenology asks, “What is this or that kind of experience like?”” (p. 9). The actual experiences of the participants were used to develop greater insight into the phenomenon being studied. Hermeneutic phenomenology was specifically appropriate because this research studied people where they were naturally engaged in their worlds (van Manen, 1990). Through the data gathering process, participants reflected on their experiences with the phenomenon. Those reflections provided insight into the deeper meaning of their experiences, which in turn emerged as the themes of the research. Hermeneutic phenomenology seeks to interpret the lived experiences of the participants to determine the deeper meaning of those experiences (van Manen, 1990).

The point of phenomenological research is to utilize other people’s experiences and their reflections on those experiences to come to a deeper grasp of the meaning of the lived experiences in relation to the phenomenon (van Manen, 1990). Quantitative procedures such as surveys and other statistical methods are not appropriate for use in phenomenological research. Therefore, the data was collected using a combination of interviews, a focus group, and artifact analysis (van Manen, 1990). These data collection methods provided information that gave insight into the lived experiences of the participants, which is the focus of hermeneutic phenomenology (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 1990). These were appropriate means for collecting data because they provided information about experiences from a variety of collection methods which helped to determine meaning structures that may not be clear without the rich, thick descriptions that were produced (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 1990).

The inquiry was focused on understanding how teachers described their decision making as they determine if, when, or how they will integrate play-based learning experiences into the lessons in their academic standards-driven curriculum. The nature of hermeneutical phenomenology lies in the goal to understand how participants have experienced a phenomenon in their natural engagement with the world (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 1990).

“Phenomenology attempts to explicate the meanings as we live them in our everyday existence, or lifeworld” (van Manen, 1990, p. 11). This study improved understanding of how kindergarten teachers describe their everyday experiences. The focus was the phenomenon of making pedagogical decisions related to play-based learning while adhering to the requirements of the academic learning standards within kindergarten classrooms.

Research Questions

RQ1: How do select kindergarten teachers in a South Carolina school district describe their experiences integrating play-based learning experiences into their standards-driven curriculum?

RQ2: How do participants describe the value of play in kindergarten classrooms which are driven by standards-based curriculum?

RQ3: What are participants’ descriptions of their role as the guiding adult in relation to student learning experiences in classrooms which are driven by standards-based curriculum?

RQ4: What challenges do participants face in making instructional decisions to meet the academic requirements resulting from standards-based curriculum while maintaining developmentally appropriate practice?

Setting

The research setting was a suburban school district in South Carolina. The district is composed of 12 elementary schools, four middle schools, and five high schools. It is the 13th largest district in the state, serving over 16,000 students. This district was selected based on the variety of demographics that can be found among the students who attend the elementary schools. The racial composition of the schools in the district is varied. The minority student population within schools in the district ranges from 5% to 67%. The free and reduced lunch population within the schools ranges from 10% to 69%. The South Carolina state report card for schools assigns a poverty index for each school. This number is calculated based on the number of students receiving services from Medicaid, the Supplemental Nutrition Aid Program (SNAP), and the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program (TANF). The poverty index also accounts for numbers of homeless, foster, and migrant children attending the school. The poverty indexes in this district range from 17-79.

Participants were selected from various elementary schools within the district. Including teachers who work with differing student populations allowed for perspectives to be considered from schools that possess a variety of strengths and weaknesses. Teachers working in schools with more affluent student populations may have different experiences than those teachers who work with students in high need schools. Schools with different school populations sometimes face diverse challenges, and that variety of needs potentially impacted the experiences of the participants in the study. I had no direct connections with this district or the potential participants, so it was a setting which made it easier to avoid potential researcher bias (Creswell, 2013).

Participants

A criterion sampling strategy was used for the study, noting its appropriateness because teachers were only selected who have experienced the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). Criterion sampling allowed me to utilize only participants that were likely to provide rich information because of their experiences with the phenomenon being studied (Patton, 2002). The potential participant pool was restricted to kindergarten teachers in public school classrooms in South Carolina. In addition, the potential participant pool was bounded by teachers who have experience with integrating play-based learning into their classrooms. This purposeful bounding ensured that the participants met the necessary criteria for participation in the study. Since all participants were public school kindergarten teachers who integrate play-based learning into their classrooms, they all incorporate academic content requirements that result from academic learning standards as they make instructional decisions each day in their classrooms. Using these criteria to bound the study ensured that participants have experienced the phenomenon being studied (Patton, 2002).

Kindergarten teachers in the district were contacted through email. The purpose of the study was explained, and their participation was requested. The initial email indicated that only teachers who integrate play-based learning were eligible to participate. The integration of play-based learning is a fluid characteristic of classrooms which can occur in different ways and at different frequencies. Therefore, it is a characteristic that would be difficult to measure using a quantifiable instrument or survey. Teachers who identified themselves as integrating play-based learning were included in the participant pool. If they viewed themselves as someone who integrates play-based learning, then they qualified as participants. As the data was gathered, I

developed a better understanding of the teachers' perceptions of what it means to integrate play-based learning as they described their experiences.

Teachers who were willing to participate signed an informed consent form indicating their understanding of their role in the research (see Appendix A). A total of 12 teachers participated in the study. Sample size for qualitative research is ambiguous in many ways, and can be dependent upon the goals of the study (Patton, 2002). This sample size is sufficient for this study because saturation was reached during the data collection process. The participants provided thick, rich data, which provided the breadth that is important for qualitative research (Patton, 2002). The level of teaching experience among the participants varied, with the newest teacher having four years of experience and the most veteran teacher having 32 years of experience. The participants also had variety in their previous experiences. Some have spent their entire career in kindergarten, while other teachers have experience in all elementary levels, special needs settings, private school settings, and preschool classrooms. All participants have earned bachelor's degrees, some participants hold master's degrees, and some of the others are currently working toward achieving their graduate degrees. The free and reduced lunch student populations at the participants' schools mirrored the district. The participants teach at schools with free and reduced lunch population percentages ranging from 12% to 69%. The school with 69% of students receiving free and reduced lunch has the highest percentage in the district.

Procedures

I submitted a completed research proposal to the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) in addition to following appropriate procedures to secure permission from the participating district to conduct research within the district. Once approval was granted from both sources, I used email to seek out participants for the study. See Appendix B for IRB

Approval. See Appendix C for site approval. When volunteers were identified, they signed an informed consent form to indicate that they understood the purpose of the study and their rights as a participant in the study. See Appendix A for participant consent form.

Interview questions were piloted with teachers who were not participating in the study to solidify the interview questions for clarity and quality (see Appendix D). After piloting the questions, interviews were scheduled with individual teachers who were participants. Those interviews were audio recorded. I conducted the interviews at the participants' schools or at other locations which were convenient for the participants. I visited each classroom to take photographs of the learning environment in their classrooms. Children were not present when the photographs were taken. These photographs were later analyzed for themes in relation to the physical characteristics of the classrooms. After all interviews were complete, a focus group was scheduled at a central location within the district for all teachers who participated in interviews. The focus group was also audio recorded. During interviews and the focus group, I took notes about aspects of those experiences that cannot be captured through the audio recordings. The audio recordings of the interviews and the focus group were transcribed by a professional transcriber. I submitted the audio files to the professional transcriber using the pseudonyms that were assigned to the participants to ensure confidentiality. Each file was submitted individually as I completed the interviews and focus group.

The Researcher's Role

I am currently a kindergarten teacher, and I have spent my 13-year career in early childhood classrooms working with kindergarten and first grade students in two different schools. I have a strong passion about early childhood education, specifically ensuring that DAP is not sacrificed because of increasing academic requirements for young children that can result

from the implementation of academic learning standards. As an early childhood educator, I have a responsibility to advocate for developmentally appropriate instructional strategies to remain in kindergarten classrooms regardless of what state or federal requirements may be implemented.

The district that was involved in the study is adjacent to the district where I am currently teaching, but I have no direct connections with the district or the teachers that participated in the study. Due to the potential biases that could possibly result from my personal experiences with the phenomenon being studied, I used a reflective log to record my emotions, feelings, and thoughts related to the study and the participants (see Appendix E). I was the human instrument in the process of data collection for this research. In addition, the worldview that I possess because of my role as a mother, wife, and Christian potentially impacted my interpretation of the results.

Data Collection

There are a variety of data collection methods that are typical and appropriate for phenomenological studies. Instead of the statistical measures that are typically used in quantitative research, hermeneutical phenomenological research relies on descriptions of lived experiences as the material which is analyzed (van Manen, 1990). In qualitative research, data triangulation combines methods to strengthen a study testing for consistency among varied data collection methods (Patton, 2002). For this study, varied methods revealed different components within the data which allowed for comparison about the consistency of the data across multiple qualitative methods. Bringing multiple data sources together allowed various aspects of the phenomenon to be illustrated (Patton, 2002). In order to achieve data triangulation, I used multiple methods to collect data to provide a better understanding of the phenomenon being studied, including interviews, artifact analysis, and a focus group (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002).

Interviews

Interviews are a critical component of phenomenological research (Creswell, 2013). I piloted the interview questions (see Appendix D) with teachers who were not participants in the study prior to beginning data collection. Piloting the questions allowed me to ensure that the questions were written clearly and were likely to provide rich, thick data. After completing the pilot interviews, I began interviews with participants to help me gain an understanding of their experiences on an individual level. The interviews, which were audio recorded, used open-ended questions coupled with probes or follow-up questions which sought to gain thick, rich information from the participants (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). I used an interview guide to frame the questions and to note pertinent information that may not be apparent in an audio recording such as gestures or facial expressions (van Manen, 1990). The interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriber.

The open-ended interview design encouraged participants to communicate in-depth stories of their experiences with the phenomenon as they developed a sense of empathy from the relationship between the interviewer and the participant (Schwandt, 2015). Interviews conducted as a part of hermeneutic phenomenology serve two purposes. First, the interview data provides a strategy for gathering narrative material that allows for the development of a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied (van Manen, 1990). In addition, the interview allows the researcher to develop a conversational relation with the interviewee. It is critical for the researcher to keep an open approach to the meaning of the phenomenon as the situation is set up to promote a collaborative hermeneutic conversation. These types of conversations foster a reflective approach which allows for the deeper themes of the experiences to emerge since life experiences are the data of human science research (van Manen, 1990).

The following structured questions were used as a starting point for interviews with the participants:

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. More specifically, tell me a little about your teaching background and experience.
3. What do you see as the most important developmental and academic needs for kindergarten students?
4. How would you describe the role of play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms?
5. What experiences have you had with integrating play-based learning experiences into your classroom?
6. What positive or negative impact have those experiences had on your students' achievement?
7. What do you view your role as the adult in your students' learning experiences?
8. What role do you believe the learning environment plays in student achievement?
9. What difficulties, if any, do you face in integrating play-based learning experiences into your classroom?
10. If I have any other questions, may I contact you through phone or email?

In addition, possible follow-up questions included:

1. What do you mean by...?
2. Would you please tell me more about that?
3. How do you feel about...?
4. What has led to your conclusions about...?

The purpose of the questioning was to gain knowledge about the participants' direct experiences with play-based learning as well as their beliefs about best practices in their

classrooms. Questions one and two were included to make the participant feel comfortable and to get the conversation started. Question three was intended to gain an understanding of the participant's views of which needs are most important for their students. All kindergarten teachers do not share the same beliefs about which student needs should be prioritized (Hope-Southcott, 2013; Izumi-Taylor et al., 2010). This question provided some insight into the beliefs of the participants, which in turn impacts the experiences of the students in the classroom. Questions four through six were designed to gain a greater understanding of the specific experiences and beliefs that teachers have in relation to play-based learning in their classrooms. Teachers have a range of understanding about the potential impact of the presence or absence of play-based learning, which can lead to the gap in theory and practice (Bulunuz, 2013; Lynch, 2014; Niteck & Chung, 2013). These questions were designed to develop an understanding of the participants' understandings and beliefs.

Adults play a pivotal role in kindergarten classrooms (Hyoven, 2011; Ridgway & Quinones, 2012). Question seven was included as an avenue to gain information about the participants' perceptions of their role in learning experience. Research has also demonstrated the learning environment is a key factor in student achievement (Roskos & Christie, 2011; Roskos & Christie, 2013). Therefore, question eight was included to assess participants' prioritization of the learning environment in their classrooms. There is often a gap in theory and practice resulting from increasing requirements for young children because of the implementation of state academic standards (Bulunuz, 2013; De Hann et al., 2014; Ljung-Djarf & Olander, 2012; Lynch, 2014). Question nine was included to delve into what difficulties teachers encounter when trying to balance the many needs of their students with the many requirements that they face as professionals. Follow up questions allowed me to seek clarification on data gathered during

interviews and provided a means to pursue avenues that were not anticipated for gathering additional information.

Artifact Analysis

I took photographs of the participants' classroom environments and analyzed the photographs for physical characteristics in the classrooms that may encourage or discourage the implementation of play-based learning experiences. I used constant comparison as the information gathered from the pictures was compared with the data provided through interviews. These researcher-generated photographs were used in conjunction with the answers to the interview questions to discover themes related to how learning environments impact learning in kindergarten classrooms. Photographs can provide very descriptive data and help bring clarity to subjective concepts, and therefore the information gained from photographs was helpful for looking for clues about relationships and activities (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Focus Groups

Once the interviews were completed, the participating teachers were invited to participate in a focus group (see Appendix F) to further discuss their experiences with play-based learning in their classrooms (Creswell, 2013). The focus group provided an opportunity for teachers to explore complex concepts related to their experiences with the phenomenon as they interacted with one another. As teachers interacted with other participants, they provided additional data as they learned about their peers' experiences. In addition, the focus group allowed me to interact with more than one participant in a single setting. A central location within the district was identified, and all participating teachers were invited to attend. The focus group was audio recorded and I took notes about pertinent information that could not be captured through audio recordings. Additionally, the recording of the experiences shared at the focus group was

transcribed by a professional transcriber.

The following structured questions served as a starting point for the discussion among the focus group participants:

1. Please share with the group your name, school, and experience teaching.
2. Please share experiences that you have had with play-based learning in your classroom.
3. Describe how effective or ineffective that you felt that those learning experiences were.
4. Describe the positive experiences that you've had with integrating play-based learning in your classroom
5. Tell me about disappointments that you have had with integrating play-based learning into your classroom.
6. What difficulties do you face with integrating play-based learning experiences into your classroom?
7. What are important components of the learning environment in your classroom?
8. How does adult support influence play-based learning experiences?
9. What do you see as the advantages or disadvantages of play-based learning in your classroom?
10. Is there anything else that you would like to share about your experiences with integrating play-based learning into your classroom?

In addition, possible follow-up questions included:

1. What do you mean by...?
2. Would you please tell me more about that?
3. How do you feel about...?
4. What has led to your conclusions about...?

These questions were designed to build upon information gathered in the individual participant interviews. The focus group questions were aimed at extracting information about the perceptions of the same experiences that were described in the interviews, with the goal being to gain richer, deeper information because of the interactions that occurred among the participants. As with the interview questions, follow-up probes allowed me the opportunity to seek clarification during the discussion when needed.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis is different from data analysis in quantitative studies. Quantitative data analysis focuses on statistics; however, those are not appropriate strategies for use in phenomenological human science research (van Manen, 1990). Qualitative research focuses on organizing the data to allow the researcher to identify themes which give order and control to the research and writing (van Manen, 1990). Once themes are developed, the data is then communicated using figures, tables, or narrative (Creswell, 2013). Data analysis in hermeneutic phenomenology seeks to interpret the texts of lived experiences in order to gain meaning from them (van Manen, 1990). The data analysis in the study employed memoing, identification of patterns within the study, and the discovery of emerging themes.

Memoing

As the transcripts of the interviews and focus groups were read the first time, memoing was used to record initial thoughts and notions about what is appearing in the data (Patton, 2002). This allowed me to gain an overall understanding of the data and begin to look at commonalities and differences. Creswell (2013) points out that “memoing becomes a part of developing the theory as the researcher writes down ideas as data are collected and analyzed (p. 85). The process of memoing allowed the initial organization of the data to begin as I identified

and noted potential themes that were emerging. Themes which appear in hermeneutical phenomenological research are at best a simplification; they provide a form for capturing the phenomenon as one attempts to make sense of the phenomenon (van Manen, 1990). I began reviewing interview transcripts as soon as the first interview was completed. By reviewing transcripts throughout the data collection process, it allowed for a constant comparative among the information provided from different participants.

Identifying Patterns from Participants' Input

The transcripts of the interviews and focus group were coded to determine what themes emerged through analyzing the data. van Manen (1990) wrote, "In determining the universal or essential quality of a theme our concern is to discover aspects or qualities that make a phenomenon what it is and without which the phenomenon could not be what it is" (p. 107). This process of discovery provided a form to capture the phenomenon that was being studied (van Manen, 1990). Subthemes were developed by locating and synthesizing significant statements (Creswell, 2013). Once these subthemes were identified, they were chunked together and significant themes were developed. AtlasTi™ software was used to code the data. As the data began to be further organized into the themes that emerged, it was manipulated outside of the software. This process of coding allowed me to identify and communicate the patterns and significant ideas that appeared in the data (Patton, 2002). Coding is a cyclical process, so multiple cycles of coding the data were required (Saldaña, 2013). Many portions of the data were assigned multiple codes until the analysis process made it more apparent which theme was most closely aligned with each portion of the data.

Emerging Themes from Artifact Analysis

Artifact analysis was used as the photographs were analyzed in light of the themes that emerged from the interviews and focus group (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). Characteristics of the physical learning environments were identified that encourage or discourage play-based learning experiences. Data about the environmental components was analyzed to look for themes in relation to how teachers' experiences align with the way that they structure their classroom learning environment. Analyzing the photographs in conjunction with the interview data allowed me to identify themes in relation to the classroom environments that have been established by the participating teachers. Through this analysis, I could work toward data triangulation as I linked the photographs with the information that I gathered from my other data collection sources (Patton, 2002).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness generally refers to the level to which a study is authentic and can be validated (Creswell, 2013). In qualitative studies, researchers typically demonstrate the accuracy of their studies by employing strategies to ensure credibility to ensure that meaning is accurately interpreted. In addition, transferability must be considered to ensure that results could be gathered in other settings. Allowing for dependability requires the research to be reported in detail, and confirmability makes it possible for others to confirm the findings of the research (Creswell, 2013).

Credibility

Credibility refers to the accuracy with which the researcher interprets meaning from the data they gather from the participants (Creswell, 2013). The researcher is as important as the research itself in establishing the credibility of a study (Schwandt, 2015). Triangulation is one strategy that can be used to improve the credibility of the study. Multiple sources of data and

types of data collection were utilized in this study to allow for triangulation to ensure that evidence can be corroborated from multiple sources (Creswell, 2013). I kept a reflective log of my personal thoughts, feelings, and emotions to help separate those thoughts from the analysis process (See Appendix E). The reflective log helped me to avoid allowing my personal experiences to impact my interpretation of the data, which is important in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002).

Member checks were also used to increase credibility (Creswell, 2013). Participants were given the opportunity to review the transcripts of their interviews and the focus group. They also had the opportunity to review the findings to ensure that I accurately reflected their thoughts and feelings. Providing this opportunity increased the credibility of the study as it confirmed that I have interpreted the data accurately based on how the participants intended to communicate their experiences (Patton, 2002).

Transferability

Transferability refers to whether the findings can be transferred to other settings and contexts (Creswell, 2013). Thick, rich descriptions were used during the study to increase other researchers' ability to understand the results and determine the transferability of the findings. Through thorough description, other researchers will be more adequately equipped to transfer the study to other areas. I kept a reflective log which documented my personal feelings, thoughts, and emotions throughout the study (See Appendix E). In addition, I kept a memo log to document everything that happened in the process of conducting the research.

Dependability

Dependability involves the consideration of reliability which is accomplished by looking closely at the research process. Therefore, the research process in this study was reported in extensive detail. The researcher has an obligation to design and carry out the study using logical methods, to make all findings traceable, and to document the study clearly (Schwandt, 2015). The detailed description that has been included in this study makes it possible for the researcher to address these issues, which will allow for the research to be repeated in other settings or contexts (Creswell, 2013). I kept a memo log throughout the study to increase dependability by recording a detailed description of the entire process. Replication will be possible due to the complete description that is included in the study.

Confirmability

The level of confirmability relates to whether results from a study could be confirmed by other individuals. This involves taking steps to ensure that findings are based on data and its interpretation, instead of being based on researcher biases or other factors linked to the specific researcher (Schwandt, 2015). The previously discussed strategies of triangulation and member checking improve the confirmability of the study.

Ethical Considerations

All participants and schools were assigned pseudonyms to protect anonymity and to ensure that they cannot be identified once the research is complete. No identifying information was included in the final report to ensure that participants remain anonymous. Both electronic copies and hard copies of data were stored securely. Passwords were used to protect electronic data on the researcher's laptop. A locked cabinet was used to store hard copies of data. Through interactions with the participants during interviews and the focus group, I sought to develop a

mutual trust between myself and the participants (Silverman, 2014). All participants provided their consent to participate prior to beginning the study and signed an informed consent.

Participation was completely voluntary, and all participants had a thorough understanding of the study before agreeing to participate. Participants were aware that they were being audio recorded during both the interviews and the focus group. All participants were aware that they had the option to leave the study at any time if they determined that they no longer wished to participate for any reason (Creswell, 2013).

Summary

In planning the methodology, the varied data collection methods and data analysis methods which are explained in this chapter were appropriate for the design of this study (van Manen, 1990). The hermeneutic phenomenological research design incorporated interviews, a focus group, and artifact analysis to gather data about the phenomenon being studied. Coding and memoing were appropriate methods to analyze data for this study design (van Manen, 1990). The considerations of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability which impact trustworthiness were key components to consider in designing the methodology of the study (Creswell 2013). In addition, ethical considerations were critical to ensure that all parts of the study were carried out with integrity (Creswell, 2013). Through a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, this study sought to describe the phenomenon of kindergarten teachers' experiences with integrating play-based learning into academic standards-driven curriculum. The study design, research questions, setting, participants, procedures, and the researcher's role have been described in this chapter. The data collection methods, data analysis methods, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations have also been explained.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutical phenomenological study is to understand the essence of participants' experiences with the phenomenon of integrating play-based learning into their early childhood classrooms. I set out to describe kindergarten teachers' experiences with integrating play-based learning into standards-based academic curriculum in a school district in South Carolina. This chapter begins with an overview of the participants. The results of the study are also presented in this chapter in themes which are organized based on the related research question. Themes are included in relation to participant experiences with integrating play-based learning, the value that participants see in the inclusion of play-based learning, the role of the adult as a guiding adult in play-based learning, and difficulties that arise when integrating play-based learning into standards-driven curriculum. Following the discussion of the themes, the research questions are answered.

Participants

There were 12 participants in the study. All of participants identified themselves as teachers who integrate play-based learning into their public-school kindergarten classrooms. The participants possess between four and 32 years of teaching experience, and they have taught areas from preschool through middle school. The participants work with students from varying backgrounds.

Table 1

Participant Overview

Name	Age	Years of Experience	Grades Taught	Current School's Student Population	Experience at Previous Schools
Ashley	35	11	kindergarten, first grade	affluent	4 schools, varied student populations
Bethany	33	11	kindergarten, first grade	mixed	2 schools
Courtney	45	23	kindergarten, first, second, and fourth grades	affluent	2 districts, 3 schools, varied student populations
Dana	27	4	kindergarten and third grade	mixed	none
Elizabeth	52	28	kindergarten and first grade	affluent	2 private schools, 1 other public school
Faith	53	25	kindergarten, special education, gifted middle school, preschool	affluent	4 public schools in two different states, varied student populations
Gretchen	40	17	kindergarten, first grade	high needs	2 districts, 3 schools, all high needs
Hannah	28	5	kindergarten	affluent	None
Irene	37	15	kindergarten,	affluent	3 schools in

			first and second grades		3 different districts, varied student populations
Jill	32	10	kindergarten, first grade	affluent	none
Kelly	55	32	kindergarten, first grade, special education	high needs	3 schools, two different states
Lauren	40	13	kindergarten, fourth and fifth grades, preschool	affluent	Private school, 1 other school in a different state

The following is a more detailed description of each of the participants, including information about their teaching background and their experiences with the phenomenon being studied. They are listed using the pseudonym that they were assigned in order to ensure their anonymity.

Ashley

Ashley began her teaching career in first grade in a different district. After taking some time off from teaching when she had children, she returned to teaching. She taught first grade for several more years before moving to kindergarten. She has been teaching kindergarten for several years. Ashley has worked in multiple schools during her career. She has spent time teaching in schools with very affluent student populations as well as schools with a higher percentage of students living in poverty. Although her current school serves more affluent students, her most recent experience was at a school which serves a higher percentage of students who live in poverty. Ashley has always believed that play-based learning is a part of

developmentally appropriate practice. In recent years, she has begun integrating play-based learning more frequently in her classroom as she has seen the positive impacts on her students.

Bethany

Bethany has been teaching for 11 years, and all her teaching experience has been with early childhood students. She spent eight years teaching first grade before changing schools and moving to kindergarten. She noted that it was beneficial to move to kindergarten from first grade because she has a strong understanding of what is going to be expected of her students the following school year. Bethany's school is varied in the student population. The children come from a variety of socioeconomic levels. Bethany was very willing to share her experiences with play-based learning in her classroom. Since her experience has all been with early childhood students, she is very aware of the developmental needs of young students and believes that play-based learning is an effective way to meet those needs.

Courtney

Courtney has 23 years of teaching experience. During those 23 years, she has taught in two different districts and at three different schools. She has spent time teaching kindergarten, first grade, second grade, and fourth grade. She also has experience with looping with her students. Courtney has been at her current school for 17 years, and she has been in kindergarten for the last seven of those years. Much like Ashley, Courtney spent time working in a district with a much higher poverty rate before moving to the school where she currently serves a more affluent student population. Courtney was very eager to talk about the ways she sees play-based learning making positive impacts on her students. She has been teaching for many years, so she has seen many changes in practices within schools. Courtney believes in importance of maintaining play-based learning practices for young learners.

Dana

Dana started teaching kindergarten in the middle of the year four years ago, when a teacher left from her school midyear. She taught kindergarten the first two years, took a year to teach third grade, and has now returned to kindergarten. Her experiences, including her student teaching experience, have all been at the school where she currently teaches. Of the participants, Dana is the newest to enter the teaching profession. The students at Dana's school also come from a variety of demographic backgrounds. She was very enthusiastic in the way that she spoke about play-based learning. Her teaching experience is more limited than the other participants, but she was still passionate about her beliefs in regards to what is best for children. She has integrated play-based learning into her classroom the entire time she has been teaching, and she was very willing to share why she believes it is so important.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth has been teaching for 28 years. She began teaching by working at two different private schools which both cater to students with learning difficulties, either behavioral or academic. She then moved to her current district where she has been for 22 years. She taught one year of first grade, but has spent the rest of her time teaching kindergarten. She has more experience specifically teaching kindergarten than any of the other participants. Her current school has a student population which is predominantly made up of affluent students. Elizabeth's early years of working with students with learning difficulties has impacted how she approaches many things in her current classroom. She believes in the value of play-based learning to help students have opportunities to demonstrate learning in a variety of ways, therefore she is intentional about making those occasions available to her students.

Faith

Faith also has a variety of teaching experiences, including working with children from preschool up to middle school. She is originally from North Carolina where she started her teaching career. She spent four years working with academically gifted middle school students. She also spent some time teaching special education students for several years. She has been teaching kindergarten at her current school for 11 years, which is a school with a low percentage of students who qualify for free or reduced lunch. Faith has had a variety of experiences in her teaching career, since she has not spent all of her time working with early childhood students. This varied experience gave her insight into the importance of making sure early childhood students have opportunities which meet their unique developmental needs. Faith uses play-based learning in her classroom because she sees great value in it.

Gretchen

Gretchen has spent her 17-year career working with a high percentage of students who live in poverty. She taught her first year in first grade, and she has been in kindergarten for the 16 years since then. She has worked in two different districts at three different schools. Gretchen has been at her current school teaching kindergarten for 10 years. She has never worked at a school which serves affluent families. She has always worked in Title I schools, which are schools that receive supplemental federal funding due to the presence of a high percentage of students who come from low-income families. Gretchen spoke a lot about the needs that students have which are not academic in nature. She is certain to include play-based learning into her classroom because she sees where it can meet academic needs while also providing opportunities for the non-academic needs to be met. She emphasized how important it

is for students to have access to experiences that will help them to be successful in a variety of ways, not just academically.

Hannah

Hannah is very much like Dana in that she is relatively new to teaching with five years of experience. Those years have all been spent teaching kindergarten at the school where she currently teaches. She also student taught in kindergarten at her current school, so her experiences have not been as varied as some of the other participants. She is currently working on her Master's degree in language and literacy, so she is very focused on those areas. Hannah was very eager to share her experiences. Although she has more limited teaching experience than many of the other participants, she was very adamant in her belief that play-based learning is valuable and necessary in kindergarten classrooms. She enjoys using it to help students to grow and demonstrate their learning.

Irene

Irene began teaching in a Title I area in a different part of South Carolina. She taught there for six years before getting married and moving to the Columbia area and teaching one year in a neighboring district. When she had children, she took time off with them before returning to teaching. In her eight years at her current school, she has spent time teaching kindergarten, first grade, and second grade. She also has experience with looping with her students, which means that she remained with the same group of students for more than one school year. Irene has a total of 15 years of experience. Irene was the least talkative of the participants. She identifies herself as a teacher who integrates play-based learning, but she did not have the passion or enthusiasm about it that many of the other teachers demonstrated. She was less able to articulate her beliefs about play-based learning and the experiences that she has had with it.

Jill

Jill has 10 years of experience teaching. She has worked with kindergarten and first grade students for all 10 years. Like Irene, she has spent time looping back and forth between kindergarten and first grade during those 10 years. Jill completed her Master's degree in language and literacy, which she indicated has an impact on her approach in the classroom. All of Jill's teaching experience has been at the school where she currently teaches. Jill is a very quiet, reserved individual, and that came through as she spoke about her classroom. Although she described her experiences with play-based learning, she was not as enthusiastic as some of the other participants. It was difficult to tell whether her lack of enthusiasm was the nature of her personality or the fact that she did not have the same passion for play-based learning that some of the other participants had.

Kelly

Kelly began teaching in Virginia 32 years ago. Her undergraduate degree is in elementary education, but she also has earned a Master's degree in learning disabilities. She taught children with learning disabilities for five years before moving to a different school where she taught kindergarten. In her 26 years in Virginia, Kelly taught kindergarten at two different schools, including a Title One school. She moved to South Carolina, and after interviewing for a special education position she was placed in a kindergarten position. In the six years at her current school, she has taught both kindergarten and first grade. She returned to kindergarten four years ago. She works in a Title One school which serves a high percentage of students who qualify for free or reduced lunch. She prefers kindergarten because she believes that it is so important to provide a solid foundation. Like many of the other participants, Kelly was very fervent when she spoke about play-based learning and what she believes are the best ways to

meet the needs of young learners. She is a very experienced teacher, and she has worked with many different types of students. Kelly believes strongly that even amid high academic requirements, young students need to have play-based learning preserved in their classrooms.

Lauren

Like many of the other participants, Lauren's teaching background is varied. She began her career in a private school in North Carolina. She spent some time teaching fourth and fifth grade before taking time off when she had children. When she returned to teaching, she initially worked in a preschool setting before beginning at her current school as a teaching assistant in a kindergarten classroom. She became a kindergarten classroom teacher several years ago, and she believes that kindergarten is her favorite grade level to work with. Lauren was very vocal in her belief that she sees a variety of values resulting from play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms. Lauren integrates play-based learning into her classroom consistently because of her confidence in the unique way that it can meet the needs of young students.

Results

The study was based on four research questions which addressed experiences with integrating play-based learning experiences, teachers' perceptions of the value of play-based learning, teachers' views of their role as the adult, and the difficulties associated with the integration of play-based learning. The themes and subthemes that emerged are described below. That is followed by an explanation of how these themes answered each of the research questions.

Theme Development

The interviews were completed first, and as I finished them I began to analyze the transcripts of the data. Once the interviews were finished, the participants were invited to

participate in the focus group. The six participants who were able and interested in participating in the focus group met at a location central in the district where they teach. Following the focus group I immediately began analyzing that data as well. I analyzed the data as it was being collected to allow for constant comparative as I was looking for themes to emerge. With each transcript, I used memoing during the initial reading of the transcript to begin to formulate initial ideas about themes. I wrote the memoing notes by hand to jot down ideas that began to appear in the transcripts. I analyzed the data several times to assign codes to the data. Multiple codes were applicable to many portions of the data, and Atlas.Ti™ software was used to assign the codes. As I continually analyzed and coded, it became possible to identify subthemes and determine which portions of the data supported each subtheme. I then began manipulating the data outside of Atlas.Ti™ as the organization of overarching themes and subthemes began to emerge. The themes and subthemes are listed below in Table 1, along with the codes that informed those themes.

Table 2

Codes and Themes

Theme	Subtheme	Codes
Academic Values Resulting From Play-based Learning	Increased engagement	Free centers Student choice Student expectations Student grouping Teacher adjustments
	Fine motor skills	Fine motor skills Self-help skills
	More meaningful learning	Academic benefits Benefits ELA Prereading skills Standards
	Problem solving	Academic benefits

		Benefits Self-help skills Student expectations Student prior experiences
Functional Values Resulting From Play-based Learning	Communication	Academic readiness Benefits Free centers Prereading skills Social skills
	Social skills	Free centers Prereading skills Self-help skills Social skills
Intentional Instructional Planning	Free play for exploration	Benefits Difficulties Free centers
	Integration of academic content	Academic benefits Academic play Academic readiness Assessment ELA Math Prereading skills Standards
	Integration into learning centers	Academic benefits Academic play Academic readiness Assessment ELA Math Prereading skills Standards Teacher collaboration
	Observer	Adult role Assessment Student grouping Student needs Teacher adjustments
	Strategic planning of the	Adult role

	classroom environment	Classroom environment Procedures Student choice Teacher adjustments
	Purposefully designed lesson planning	Adult role Assessment Standards Student expectations Student grouping Student needs Teacher collaboration
	Ability to differentiate	Adult role Standards Student grouping Student needs
Classroom Interactions as Key Component	Supportive administration	Administration response Difficulties
	Classroom management	Adult role Classroom environment Procedures Student expectations
	Scaffolding through interactions with students	Adult role Assessment Standards Student grouping Student needs
Difficulties with Implementing Play-based Learning	Time	Difficulties Free centers Teacher adjustments
	Developmental readiness for content	Academic readiness Assessment Change over time Difficulties Prereading skills Standards Student expectations
	Change over time	Change over time Difficulties

	Standards
	Student expectations
Differing prior experiences	Change over time
	Difficulties
	Fine motor skills
	Parents
	Prereading skills
	Social skills
	Student prior experiences
Student choice	Difficulties
	Student choice
	Teacher adjustments

Through the data analysis process, five main themes emerged. Within these five main themes, 21 subthemes emerged. The main themes were the academic values resulting from play-based learning, the functional values resulting from play-based learning, intentional instructional planning, classroom interactions as a key component, and difficulties with implementing play-based learning.

Theme One: Academic Values Resulting from Play-based Learning

The first theme provides an understanding to the second research question, “How do participants describe the value of play in kindergarten classrooms which are driven by standards-based curriculum?” Teachers identified a variety of benefits which they see for their students who participate in play-based learning experiences. This first set of values describe skills or characteristics which are directly related to academic learning. Teachers shared experiences with increased student engagement, a need for work on fine motor skills, more meaningful student learning, and improved problem solving skills. These academic values which were prominent within the data emerged as subthemes.

Increased engagement. The first subtheme in the academic value of play was the increased engagement of the students. Improving the quality of student work based on increased engagement is another reason that a large portion of the participants find value in play-based learning in their classrooms. It was mentioned by nine out of 12 participants. Faith and Dana have had similar experiences in their classrooms. Faith said, “They're more focused because they're doing something they want to do” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 18, 2016). Similarly, Dana said, “It helps them stay engaged” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 12, 2016). These three participants have all observed students who are increasingly engaged when participating in play-based learning experiences.

Several of the participants attributed the increased engagement to the fact that the children enjoy playing, which naturally leads to a higher level of engagement. Hannah uses games in her classroom as a play-based instructional strategy. In relation to her students’ response to those games, she commented, “It’s a game, so it’s fun. They enjoy doing it, and it keeps them engaged” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016). She elaborated when she said,

They were super engaged, and I think it was more because we did more games and activities like that. I think that the play – They keep their hands on; they’re involved; they’re excited about learning. It’s not like, okay. I’m gonna – I have to write a hundred words, I have to write all these sentences down. (Personal communication, July 19, 2016)

Hannah’s students are more willing to be active participants in their learning when they have opportunities which are play-based. Gretchen reported that her students have also demonstrated a strong desire to engage in the play-based learning opportunities in her classroom. She said, “I

think they play really well together. Sometimes, honestly, I think they would rather go to centers twice a day than go outside for recess” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 18, 2016). According to Gretchen, her students demonstrate a strong desire to participate in learning experiences in her classroom when she makes them play-based.

As students demonstrate increasing engagement due to the presence of play-based learning, several participants also saw value in the attitude with which the students approach their learning tasks. Ashley, for example, found that students had an improved learning experience when play was integrated. She said, “Whatever it was, they were able to verbalize what they were doing and then they got to play. It was not as stressful” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 8, 2016). The children felt less pressure and were able to explain their learning. Bethany has noticed a willingness to work harder when teachers incorporate play-based learning experiences that allow children to use a variety of approaches. She remarked,

When we don't allow them to use their creativity, and allow them to collaborate with their peers, and allow them a little bit of freedom to do things how they find is the best way to do things, I think we're squashing them. And, I think that they're not interested in working harder for us too when we don't allow them to be kids. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 11, 2016)

Bethany has seen the work ethic in her classroom improve when students can participate in play-based learning experiences which allow them to take different approaches to their learning in a way that is appropriate for their development as young children.

The hands-on component of play-based learning is one characteristic that Lauren has seen as a benefit for her students. She commented, “When they get to touch and do it, they love it”

(Personal communication with interviewee, August 1, 2016). Students in Courtney's classroom have demonstrated increased engagement which she attributes to the fact that play-based learning helps students to learn without even realizing it is happening. About integrating play-based learning into academic learning, she said,

They definitely didn't see it as learning. It was like playtime. And also, just regular literacy centers too, like CVC board games where they roll the dice and they read the word. I think even stuff like that was just fun for them but they were still learning and using what they've learned to practice. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 12, 2016)

Allowing children to use newly gained learning to play games provides an avenue for students to see learning as a fun activity, which improves their engagement. Hannah has seen that not only do students demonstrate higher levels of engagement during play-based learning, they also produce a higher quality of work. She shared,

They still see it as have-to work sometimes because they know, 'I have to do this, and then I get to do this,' but it's fun. So, it's not – When we used to do a lot of paper and pencil things when I first started, it was just sloppy – They didn't care; they were just getting it done so they could go play. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016)

The level of student work has increased in Hannah's classroom as she has made a shift toward more highly engaging play-based learning experiences. For 75% of the participants in the study, the increased student engagement has been one reason that they choose to value and include play-based learning in their classrooms.

Fine motor skills. The need for increased work with fine motor skills was noted by half of the participants in the study and was the next subtheme related to the academic values of play-based learning. All the teachers who mentioned fine motor skill deficits indicated that they have seen a decrease in the level of fine motor skills that children possess when they enter school.

Kelly noticed,

Fine motor is getting weaker and weaker. And my belief is (I have no proof of this) it's because of all the technology. And fine motor is very important, especially when you're teaching them how to write, and the connection between writing, reading, and math.

There's such a connection. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 20, 2016)

Based on Kelly's experiences, the increase in technology has caused a decrease in children participating in activities which foster fine motor skill development. Ashley has had similar experiences. She commented, "With fine motor skills, they're 'doing,' and they don't 'do' anymore. They can work a screen great, but when they're playing they have to put things together, take things apart and a lot of them have trouble" (Personal communication with interviewee, August 2, 2016). Both Ashley and Kelly see play as valuable in their classrooms because it provides opportunities for them to improve fine motor skills in a world that is dominated by screen based activities, even for young children.

Lauren has also seen a decrease in fine motor skills in her children which can be improved through the integration of play-based learning in her classroom. She attributes the decrease in fine motor skills to the increase in organized children's activities. She commented,

There's such a difference from when I started to right now with the children's fine motor skills, because they don't do as much with their hands. They don't do as much crafts.

They don't – I think so much is too organized now. They don't spend enough time just

cutting, and drawing, and coloring, and you know, just for fun, and so, I really feel like fine motor skills is a big challenge that's overlooked right now. (Personal communication with interviewee, August 1, 2016)

Providing play-based experiences which allow children to practice fine motor skills is one reason that Lauren feels play is so valuable in her kindergarten classroom.

Elizabeth pointed out another possible reason that fine motor skills may be lacking among kindergarten children. She attributes it to a reduction in the numbers of children she sees attending preschool programs which provide opportunities for fine motor practice. She said,

I think they need a lot more fine motor skills than they used to, than they used to know. I think some, I think we're having less kids in pre-school programs. So, I think they need some of those foundations as knowing how to write their name and proper letter formation, knowing colors, knowing letters. Just that they, things that you kind of think that that the majority of them know. But we're finding that's changing back. We don't have as much. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 15, 2016)

Participants cited several factors outside of the kindergarten classroom setting which have negatively impacted students' fine motor skills development, thus making it important for play-based learning to be available to foster growth in this area.

Courtney and Dana also found play-based learning to be valuable because of the fine motor skills practice that it provides. They see changes in schools as being another contributing factor in the shift. Although Dana sees fine motor practice through play-based learning to be valuable, she has seen that time is often a factor. She said, "They don't take the time – we don't have the time now to focus as much on it" (Personal communication with interviewee, July 12,

2016). Courtney also mentioned the fact that teachers have had to reduce the number of artistic type activities where children are working with fine motor skills. She noted,

I think that they don't have the fine motor skills that they've had in the past. I see that happening a lot, especially in art because we don't have a lot of those painting activities. And when we do it's kind of like we send them over there and we teach them a little bit about what to do but however they cut is how they cut. And we try to give a lot of instruction in those first six weeks just teaching and making sure everybody's holding the scissors the right way and make sure everybody knows glue goes dot, dot, dot. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 12, 2016)

Courtney has seen how even her classroom there has been a reduction in not only the number of activities that can be provided for practicing fine motor skills, but also in the time available to help students practice quality fine motor skills. Play-based learning in her classroom is valuable because it provides a way for students to practice the critical fine motor skills that they may be lacking.

More meaningful learning. In addition, the subtheme of more meaningful learning appeared in the data as one way that teachers find academic value in play-based learning.

Ashley noted that she has observed academic growth and improvement as she has increased her use of play-based learning. Hannah also has seen academic benefits. She said,

I think this has helped a lot. They're actually learning from it, and you can definitely see in their writing and in when we do have math tests and stuff, you can see that they've grown a ton just from the games that we've played. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016)

Both of those participants prioritize play-based learning in their classrooms based on the growth they have seen in their students academically. Jill agreed with the improved learning of her students and attributed it to the reduction of stress that occurs in classrooms which employ play-based learning. Jill said, “I think that it helps them relax, and they're not feeling pressure so they're more willing to take risks (Personal communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016). The increased risk taking in classrooms where play-based learning is taking place helps to remove tension for young children.

In addition, the ability to engage in play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms makes learning more meaningful for students as they gain a greater comprehension of the material. Gretchen said, “They internalize what they're learning a lot more. It's like a deeper understanding I think. I feel like they just know – they can apply things a lot easier” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 18, 2016). Through play-based learning, children move beyond a surface level knowledge of academic content. This increasingly meaningful learning is one component that makes play-based learning valuable for participants in this study.

Problem solving. The final subtheme related to the academic values resulting from play-based learning emerged as participants frequently shared improved problem solving as an added academic value that results from integrating play-based learning into their kindergarten classrooms. Several of the teachers have noticed that when children can problem solve independently, as frequently happens during play-based learning experiences, they can often formulate their own solutions to problems. Lauren said,

It's very interesting watching how kids figure things out on their own, just watching. A lot of times it's a totally different way than I would guide them. So when you step back and you don't interfere and you just kind of let them figure it out on their own, they come

up with different ways that are creative in their own mind. (Personal communication with interviewee, August 2, 2016)

During play-based learning opportunities, Lauren has frequently experienced her students formulating innovative ways to solve problems that she would not have considered.

In Hannah's classroom, she has noticed that students are more likely to engage in higher level thinking when they have the freedom that comes from play-based learning experiences. She commented, "It helps them a lot, just thinking through things – 'How I can approach things if something doesn't work, what's something else I can try?' I really think it just helps them think through things, more critical thinking" (Personal communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016). She has noticed that as children are forced to solve problems, they become more creative in their solutions. In addition, Courtney has learned that often her children create solutions for themselves that may be more beneficial than the explanations that adults may provide. She noted, "It also sometimes shows me a new way to teach them that skill. That seems easier for you, let's do it your way" (Personal communication with interviewee, July 12, 2016). When students have been given the freedoms that can be associated with play-learning, they have sometimes been able to devise more valuable methods for accomplishing tasks.

Participants also expressed their experiences with children who learn to be autonomous thinkers and problem solvers through exposure to play-based learning experiences. Dana values play in her classroom because she believes "that the free play is where they'll learn to be independent" (Personal communication with interviewee, July 12, 2016). Much like Dana wants to encourage independence in her classroom, Hannah sees value in the autonomy that children gain when they learn to problem solve during play-based learning experiences. She explained,

They're a teacher too, and they know that. They know that I am not the answer to all their questions. They know to go ask the people in their group. I think it's a lot of problem-solving. So, I think with them working together and figuring out what's going on, how they can do things, they're really having to problem-solve and they're building those social skills, their community-building skills. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016)

The confidence and independence that comes from working together and problem solving is very valuable to Hannah in her classroom.

Faith also works hard in her classroom to encourage her students to problem solve on their own without always relying on adults for the answer. She described her approach in her classroom when she said,

I frustrate my kids when they first come to me because parents and teachers alike, I think, that I've listened to, they problem solve for the kids. Well, I never answer my children's questions. If they come to me in the beginning, and they say, 'Now, I'm finished with this. What do I do now?' I never answer them. I'll say, 'Well, what do you think you're supposed to do?' I always ask a question. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 18, 2016)

Like some of the other participants, Faith has found that children sometimes do not have necessary problem solving skills because the adults in their lives do not force them to problem solve on their own. She believes that play-based learning specifically provides a meaningful way for children to practice their independent problem solving skills.

For Irene and Lauren, strong problem solving skills are important to cultivate because of the long-term impact that they can have on the students. Irene said, "You always want to fix the

problem, but they're never gonna learn how to problem solve if we tell them what to do every time” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016). She believes that children must have opportunities to solve their own problems to gain skills they will need well beyond kindergarten. Lauren has observed that kids don't have opportunities to solve problems as often as they used to if teachers are not intentional in providing those opportunities. She said, “Kids today have a hard time working out problems, because they're never left to their own devices to work out anything. They don't have to solve problems anymore” (Personal communication with interviewee, August 1, 2016). Children need opportunities to work out problems using their own critical thinking skills to gain those abilities.

Problem solving is also connected to social skills in kindergarten classrooms. When playing games, Lauren's students use the problem-solving skills they are gaining to continue to work purposefully through their play-based learning experiences. She said, “They have to learn how to work out who's gonna go first, who's turn it is, if they have a disagreement how do they figure it out, instead of coming to tell. How do they figure it out?” (Personal communication with interviewee, August 1, 2016). Her students learn that they can solve some problems without intervention from an adult. This working together to problem solve has improved the relationships among Hannah's students as well as their confidence in themselves. She shared,

They know each other so much better. I switch groups up all the time, so they get to work with different people. But I definitely think they build confidence ‘I can figure this problem out. I don't need an adult to tell me how to do it’ you know? So, they can all work together, and they can kinda work on their strengths as a group. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016)

Hannah believes that children who have opportunities to work with one another in play-based learning experiences reap multiple benefits as their social skills and their confidence both grow and improve. Ashley finds that the ability to cooperate impacts all areas of the classroom. She said, “They have to be able to work together cooperatively. Really, that’s the number one thing because if they can’t do that together then they’re not gonna achieve anything academically” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 8, 2016). In Ashley’s experience, the life skill of cooperation is foundational for academic learning.

The first theme provided insight into teachers’ experiences with the academic values that result from play-based learning. Teachers described experiencing increased engagement, improved fine motor skills, more meaningful learning experiences, and enhanced problem solving skills with their students. These four subthemes give insight into specific ways that students’ academic growth can benefit from play-based learning.

Theme Two: Functional Values Resulting from Play-Based Learning

The second theme also provides insight into the second research question, “How do participants describe the value of play in kindergarten classrooms which are driven by standards-based curriculum?” Children need to develop skills that are not directly related to academic growth, but are critical in the early childhood classroom. As children demonstrate more proficiency with these skills, their academic growth is often positively affected as well (Hyoven, 2011; Weisberg et al., 2013). Participants identified two primary categories of skills outside of academic content which improve with the presence of play-based learning in classrooms. Improved communication and social skills were both mentioned frequently as teachers described their experiences with integrating play-based learning into their classrooms. These two

subthemes describe skills which are critical for kindergarten children to develop for their success both in and out of the classroom.

Communication. The first subtheme in relation to the functional values of play was communication. Several of the teachers alluded to the fact that it is now necessary to teach children how to interact more than perhaps it was before. Ashley referred to the struggle that sometimes occurs early in the year when children are learning to communicate during play-based learning experiences. She said, “At the beginning, it’s definitely a work in progress because the kids are learning how to play together, how to learn together” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 8, 2016). Early in the year, learning in a classroom with a group of peers can be difficult for children who do not have prior experiences with working with others. Lauren pointed out that sometimes when children do not have siblings, the need to learn to communicate with others is increasingly valuable. She said,

I get a lot of kids that were an only child, they didn't have any siblings, so playing with others was a challenge for them. Communicating, play, social – everything was just... it was very interesting watching it play out, they struggled at first. They learned how to communicate with others academically, socially, everything. That was very helpful to children. (Personal communication with interviewee, August 2, 2016)

Lauren has seen how there is great value in providing play-based learning opportunities in her classroom because of the growth she sees in her students’ communication skills.

Further, Courtney shared her beliefs about where she believes the root of this lack of communication is stemming from. As an experienced teacher, she has seen changes in society that have impacted kindergarten students. She said,

We've become a society of people who don't communicate unless – but through text messages and emails. That face-to-face communication is very important and I feel like that's become – in the 23 years of teaching that I've had, that's come full circle. You're having to teach kids how to communicate with each other. Because they're seeing – they're mimicking what they see at home. And we're having to teach that now. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 12, 2016)

Based on Courtney's experiences, society's move toward decreasing face to face communication has negatively impacted the communication skills that her students have when entering kindergarten.

Several other teachers shared their belief that play-based learning is valuable in their kindergarten classrooms because of the communication that is fostered during such experiences. When students play together communication becomes a necessary component, which some of the participants pointed out is valuable to their learning. Kelly said, "I really think they learn from each other, so they have to have that time to interact, even if it's workshops—whatever you're doing" (Personal communication with interviewee, July 20, 2016). Hannah echoed that belief when she said, "They learn through talking; kids learn by talking; they learn by socializing, stuff like that" (Personal communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016). Several of the participants voiced their belief that there is value in play-based learning in their kindergarten classrooms due to the improved communication skills that they see growing in their students.

Social skills. The next subtheme which emerged from the data was the need to work to improve social skills. Of the 12 participants in the study, 10 specifically mentioned social skills as a valuable component of play-based learning in their classrooms. Kelly, Irene, Gretchen, and

Ashley all explicitly stated that social skills are critical, particularly as the children enter kindergarten and begin their school experiences. Hannah agreed with their thoughts saying, “I think the biggest part is the social development, though. Just playing together and learning how to do things together – I think that’s a huge thing” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016). Play-based learning gives children an opportunity to work together, which is valuable to the participants because of the practice it provides with social skills.

Many participants cited the lack of exposure as one reason that students do not always possess strong social skills when they enter kindergarten. Elizabeth noted that she has seen a change over time with the level of social development that children enter school with. She said, Social development is at the top of the list and that’s part of our job, used not be but it’s part of our job now to teach them. I think we’ve lost the socialization of these kids and how to share. And how to work together and how to play games and take turns.

(Personal communication with interviewee, July 15, 2016)

Based on her experiences, Elizabeth now must spend more time explicitly teaching children how to work with one another than she did with students in the past.

Some participants referred to the fact that some children lack social skills due to their lack of experiences outside of their homes prior to entering kindergarten. Teachers have experienced children coming to school with fewer experiences playing and learning to cooperate when they have not attended preschool or daycare. Dana explained her experiences with this concern when she said,

These kids really need social, especially the ones that have only been with stay at home moms. You just don’t get that experience and they really need. I think, honestly, they need social – some of your kids come not going to school at all. They’ve never gone to

daycare. All they've done is been at home, so they really need that social and the play is a really big part of it. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 12, 2016)

Based on Dana's experiences, these children need play-based learning experiences in their classrooms to cultivate the social skills that have not developed prior to beginning kindergarten.

Bethany has had similar experiences with her students. She commented,

Social development is huge in kindergarten. It's very evident the kids that come having no social experiences that were home all the time. So, I think social is number one because if they can't learn to work together and get along, then they're not going to get very far. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 11, 2016)

She expressed her belief that learning to cooperate is foundational for student success in her kindergarten classroom.

Since kindergarten is the first formal schooling experience for many children, some of the participants have experienced difficulties with social skills which they believe are unique to kindergarten. Faith said, "I think it's just really important to set the social and the emotional stage, even for the ones that have already had experience with it. It's a crazy dynamic I don't think any other grade level has to worry about" (Personal communication with interviewee, July 18, 2016). Faith pointed out that in kindergarten, teachers must navigate the wide range of social development that children possess when arriving at school. Courtney has also experienced the need to determine where her students fall on the spectrum of social skill development. In her classroom, many students have not learned skills with taking turns playing cooperatively together. She noted,

Can they get along with others? Can they work together in a small group? Can they get along with the teacher and not stick their feet in the sand and say, no, I'm not gonna do

that? I feel like it takes a longer time now for them to get in that groove of how to work together in cooperative groups than it has in the past. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 12, 2016)

Courtney described spending time in her classroom explicitly teaching children the social skills required for playing games and interacting appropriately. Both Courtney and Faith find play-based learning opportunities to be valuable in their classroom because of the exposure that they provide to all students, regardless of their familiarity with social skill development prior to entering kindergarten.

Several other participants mentioned the importance of students learning to work together and collaborate. About the value of play in her classroom, Dana said, “They’ll learn how to make friends. They’ll learn how to talk and they’ll learn throughout all the other stuff” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 12, 2016). Bethany shared similar experiences. She described why she prioritizes play as valuable when she said, “It’s collaborative. They’re working with partners. Nobody’s ever playing alone just to encourage that social aspect” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 11, 2016). Dana and Bethany both expressed their belief that play-based learning experiences help their students as they learn to make friends with their peers.

The group work that occurs frequently in play-based learning impacts a variety of areas, according to some participants. Kelly touched on the impact that the ability to socialize will have on students’ academic growth. She pointed out,

They have to have that time to interact and learn from each other, which will affect the social, which will affect the reading and the math. Because a big component now in the

reading and the math is being able to explain it, to work in a group. So, I think it's very important. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 20, 2016)

Kelly explained the connection that she sees among multiple areas of student development. As one area shows growth, that can positively impact another area for children.

Likewise, Gretchen has experienced the need for allowing students to interact with one another. She noted, "I think that the interaction between children is key because that goes back to the social. The fact that they're playing together, they're working together in different groups, not all the same group, the same people every day" (Personal communication with interviewee, July 18, 2016). The variety of social experiences which are made available in Gretchen's classroom as a result of play-based instructional strategies have proven to be helpful for her students. Play-based learning allows children to have experiences that would not occur using other instructional methods, based on the experiences of many of the participants.

In addition to the academic values that result from play-based learning, teachers described their experiences with students as they demonstrate enhanced functional skills. Improved communication skills and social skills were two subthemes that emerged from the participants' descriptions of their experiences with the phenomenon. The participants described the ways that they see those improving functional skills as being valuable for the students in their classrooms.

Theme Three: Intentional Instructional Planning

The third theme which emerged provided insight into research question one, "How do select kindergarten teachers in a South Carolina school district describe their experiences integrating play-based learning experiences into their standards-driven curriculum?"

Additionally, the subthemes related to this theme also provided insight into the third research

question, “What are participants’ descriptions of their role as the guiding adult in relation to student learning experiences in classrooms which are driven by standards-based curriculum?”

Participants described their experiences which included intentionally planning certain components of the experiences for children in their classrooms. This includes making specific decisions about instructional strategies to implement as well as being purposeful in the role of the adult in the classroom. The seven subthemes which explicated this theme included free play for learning, integration of academic content, integration into learning centers, the teacher as an observer, strategically planning the environment, intentionally planning learning experiences, and having the ability to differentiate for students.

Free play for exploration. Free play was the first subtheme that emerged as participants described their experiences with intentionally planning for effective learning experiences in their classrooms. Ten out of the 12 participants referred to their use of free play centers in their classrooms as one method that they deliberately use for providing play-based learning experiences. Jill explained why she believes free play is important when she said, “It allows them to explore some of those things that we’ve been learning about even on their own. So, I think it leads into that because it gives them that exploration through just kinda in their own way” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016.) She sees value in the learning that occurs when children are allowed time to explore freely. Dana also commented on the importance of free play in kindergarten classrooms. “Free play should definitely be there all the time. I think every single day. I just don’t think it should be cut” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 12, 2016). In her decision making in her classroom, Dana places a high priority on free play.

Several other participants also shared their classroom practices in relation to the inclusion of free center time during the day. Kelly noted, “We still have a time, at the end of the day, that they do have what we call free centers, which a lot of schools have done away with” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 20, 2016). Although all kindergarten classrooms do not include these opportunities for children, she has chosen to prioritize it. Faith also includes free choice in her classroom. She said, “I do free-choice time. I do it all year long. Some of my colleagues start it and then phase it out, but I do it all year long. They have free-choice center time every day” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 18, 2016). The teachers who discussed their use of free centers frequently referred to reserving time for free choice at the end of the day.

Ashley pointed out the opportunity that children can have for making choices during free play. She shared, “I do give free center play, just because they love choosing the block station or the train station, or things like that, which they might not always get to choose if it’s a learning station” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 8, 2016). Free play gives students a time that they can make choices for themselves in their own learning. Bethany echoed the thoughts of many of the other participants when she said,

We have a specific time of the day that we do devote to learning centers and their social centers, and that's where they really play. We have out materials and manipulatives that are going to teach them, but they're still role playing. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 11, 2016)

Like many of the other participants, Bethany sees value in using free choice centers as a method for integrating play-based learning into her classroom.

Many of the participants described which centers they have available for children during their free choice center play time. Seven of the 12 participants mentioned home living as one center option in their classroom. Jill cited one way that the home living center supports the learning in her classroom when she described her students “learning about numbers when they’re cooking or dialing on the telephone or writing” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016). Students in the home living area are often practicing academic skills without realizing those skills are embedded in the play activities that they are choosing.

Literacy-based centers were common among the participants. Six of the 12 participants specifically mentioned centers which involve emergent literacy skills. Writing, art, library, magnetic letters, and reading centers were all mentioned by participants. Elizabeth and Gretchen both specifically mentioned technology related centers including computers and iPads that provide literacy based activities for children. In addition, centers which allow children to build and explore were commonly described. Although all participants do not have the same variety available to their children, eight out of 12 participants included at least some of the following materials to allow for student exploration as they build: Play-Doh, kinetic sand, manipulatives, puzzles, blocks, and Legos.

Some of the participants noted how even when engaging in building activities during centers, children can practice literacy skills they are learning. Bethany described her classroom by saying, “We have all kinds of Match Box cars, blocks – where they're doing and they're building, and they might be engineers and drawing up the works that they're building, and then they're building it with the blocks” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 11, 2016). Although the children have predominantly chosen a building activity, they have writing skills practice integrated when they draw what they are building. Likewise, Jill described how Play-

Doh can be used to reinforce skills being learned at other parts of the day. She said, “Play-Doh, we have all those different types of things – they can make the numbers, or they can make the letters out of that” (Personal communication, July 19, 2016). Children who believe they are simply playing with Play-Doh are simultaneously reinforcing prior learning about number and letter formation.

Integration of academic content. The importance of integrating play-based learning into academic content was the second subtheme that emerged. Many teachers who were interviewed have had experiences with regularly using play to reinforce the academic content being taught in their kindergarten classrooms. Hannah and Elizabeth agreed that play-based learning can be incorporated into all areas of academic content, regardless of the subject area or skill being taught. These participants communicated their belief that providing ways for children to learn while they think they are simply playing is a key component in integrating play-based learning. Elizabeth commented, “It’s play, and they think it’s play, but it really is a key part” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 15, 2016). Children can be learning through their play without realizing they are learning.

Elizabeth also pointed out that in her experience, children will mimic what they see when they are given the opportunity to play in the classroom. She described her observations of children getting marker boards and big books to practice with their friends the skills that they had previously seen their teacher model. Elizabeth noted the importance of finding ways for children to practice through play when she said, “They have to be able to practice what we model” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 15, 2016). Dana also pointed out the vocabulary growth that she has experienced from allowing students to integrate play into their academic content. She cited an example of this when she said,

Because if you go to home living, you can listen to them talk about a restaurant. That's where you would hear them say – they get vocabulary from it. 'Reservations,' or, 'I'm a waiter,' or, 'Can I take your order?' Just different things like that. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 12, 2016)

She provided another example in math when she described the following instance, "If they're playing with the dinosaurs, 'Oh, I have two dinosaurs, you have three dinosaurs, and we're gonna fight, but I can understand that you're greater and I'm least.'" (Personal communication with interviewee, July 12, 2016). Dana described both experiences as examples of how she integrates play-based learning into her academic content to help her young students learn.

Several participants also described their use of games to incorporate play-based learning into academic content in their classrooms. Irene said, "I try to do that with each thing we do, make sure that there are games to reinforce the skills that we've just taught" (Personal communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016). Courtney echoed the same sentiment when she said, "They're playing together with math games. And whatever it is that we're teaching, that's what kind of games we have out" (Personal communication with interviewee, July 12, 2016). Dana pointed out the importance of intentionally providing purposeful play opportunities to reinforce what is being taught. She said,

Teacher directed, I think, is also important because if my mini lesson is on syllables, then I think it's important for me to understand that you know what a syllable is and you can hear and recognize that. So, I want you to play this game, have fun playing it, but I also – there's a purpose. There's a goal to what you're doing. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 12, 2016)

Many of the participants expressed examples of their experiences using integration to allow for their students to participate in play-based learning while gaining the necessary academic content.

Integration into learning centers. A third subtheme which emerged was the use of learning centers in classrooms. Learning centers are activities which are designed to allow children to practice skills and content individually or in small groups. Learning centers provide a way for children to demonstrate their level of understanding of the content or skills currently being taught. They were described by nine out of the 12 participants as one method that they use to incorporate play-based learning in their classrooms. Faith, Dana, and Irene all specifically pointed out that they use learning stations during multiple portions of the day so that their students experience them during literacy and math instruction. Although the details of implementation vary among the participants, the presence of “have to” work followed by play activities was a common thread among many of the teachers. Ashley described her classroom when she said,

They'll have an academic thing they have to do first, like if there are puzzles and games, they might have to do like a word study game where it's blending words together or things like that. And then they'll move into play where they can just do puzzles and games for fun. But every station has that component in it, where it's academic, but it's still fun academic. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 8, 2016)

Courtney expressed the same idea when she said, “The centers have have-to work. And then when they're finished, we have an I-can chart and they have lists of things that they can do that we've taught and preloaded and frontloaded all that stuff all year” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 12, 2016). The required academic work prior to free play is designed with play in mind. Irene gave an example of how she uses this in her classroom. She said, “For example,

word study, they'll have Play-Doh to make their words, they'll have different beads that are alphabet beads to string them on a necklace, or stamping their words or their letters, and activities like that" (Personal communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016). The children can use play-based materials to practice academic based content throughout the day. In many of the classrooms, they are rewarded when they finish the assigned academic play by having opportunities for choosing how they play with the provided materials.

In addition to literacy learning, many teachers alluded to their use of math tubs to incorporate play into math learning as well. Hannah said, "We all do math centers, and we have math tubs, and I think that's a great way for them to play and interact with each other, but then learn at the same time. I think that is very, very beneficial" (Personal communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016). Dana, Kelly, and Irene all specifically mentioned their use of math stations during their math instruction. Kelly pointed out that math stations allow for increased small group instruction which makes it possible to meet individual student needs.

Lauren is pleased with the confidence that arises when play-based learning is used through math stations. She said, "They realize they know how to do the math. It really helps them feel success in a non-stressful way" (Personal communication with interviewee, August 1, 2016). Math stations provide a way for children to experience the academic content in a way that is not overwhelming for them. Dana described a specific example of this when she said, "They could be playing a race car game with their friend and it's adding two race cars plus three, or whatever. They're getting the academic without realizing that they're getting the academic. They think they're playing a game" (Personal communication with interviewee, July 12, 2016). Young children can have meaningful learning activities when they play and do not realize they are engaged in academic content.

Observer. Purposely planning to observe students in the classroom is the next subtheme that emerged. For 10 out of 12 of the participants, the information that they can gather when they observe their students is an important part of how they see their role as the guiding adult during play-based learning experiences. Kelly said, “It's more or less to monitor and to see – observation for me, to know what they need and what they don't need” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 20, 2016). She gains useful information about her students’ growth during their play experiences. Irene also uses the time that children are engaged in play experiences to observe and learn about her students. She said, “During their free choice, then a lot of times, I may just be reading with the kid that is wanting to read on their own, or I sit and see what they’re building, or just kinda observe and talk” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016). She finds it important during play-based learning experiences to take advantage of the opportunities she has to observe her students. Elizabeth has discovered that she can gain valuable insight into her students and their needs by observing what they are saying to one another. She said, “I’ll listen to conversations and I think that gives me a lot of information” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 15, 2016). The conversations that children have with each other are one way that Elizabeth uses observation to learn more about her students’ needs.

Several participants use the time when children are engaged in play-based learning opportunities for observing as a formative assessment tool. When describing her role, Elizabeth commented, “I’m probably taking some informal observational notes, especially if I have some concerns about kids not socializing” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 15, 2016). She went on to say,

My first thing is probably observation and then to try to notice to what they need from me during that time or a peer. Just assessments as far as observation what it is they're doing and how they're doing it. I think it's just to watch behavior, issues as well. Or the ones that choose to be by themselves and don't want to play. And I think that you know all of those are important assessment. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 15, 2016)

Elizabeth sees the observation that she is completing as a way to learn about all aspects of a child's needs, not just their academic development.

Lauren also mentioned notetaking as a component of her role as the guiding adult. She noted, "A lot of that is just walking around and watching, and just taking notes, I keep a clipboard where I can just keep notes all the time of what I see" (Personal communication with interviewee, August 1, 2016). Faith and Gretchen also mentioned their practice of taking anecdotal records of student behaviors and needs while children are playing together. Faith said, "In my anecdotal notes, I do just make observations like if they can do a certain thing" (Personal communication with interviewee, July 18, 2016). She can use what she observes the students doing during play activities to document their growth.

Gretchen discussed the same idea when she said, "My view is to observe, is to take notes, take anecdotal records of anything that I notice; things that have improved with a certain child or – usually I have a few children on my radar for certain reasons" (Personal communication with interviewee, July 18, 2016). Bethany also mentioned that observation during play time allows her to gather information about specific skills or needs that she may want to assess. She said, "A lot of our assessment is observation during that time. So, it's a lot of sitting with either a checklist or anecdotal notes, and just looking for specific things" (Personal communication with

interviewee, July 11, 2016). Kindergarten teachers have a variety of assessments to complete with students, and the observations that they can complete during play experiences help with documenting information for some of those assessments. Dana described how she uses observation for documentation. She said,

I like to sit back and I like to observe, so I like to take my notes and to figure out about them, and to see kind of where they come into play-- what they know, what they don't know. I can do my anecdotal notes, which tells you a lot. I can sit there and write all of that down and then record that within their file. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 12, 2016)

Using observation as an informal formative assessment was frequently mentioned by the participants as a part of their role as the guiding adult in play-based learning in their kindergarten classrooms.

A few of the participants emphasized the idea that watching for student growth is key to consider in kindergarten as teachers are observing. Kelly said, "I think that's where people need to realize you have to look at where the child was when he came and the growth. You can't look at the end" (Personal communication with interviewee, July 20, 2016). As she observes her students in play-based experiences she gains insight into their growth process, instead of simply focusing on the culmination of the learning experience. Dana also utilizes observation as an opportunity for formative assessment. She explained how she utilizes free center time when she said,

I'll have paper out at home living and writing and stuff like that, and I can go back and look through their artifacts to see what I'm noticing, and if there are any major issues

where I do need to pull them or if they're doing great and I need to continue to encourage. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 12, 2016)

She takes advantage of the products that students produce independently during play experiences to provide her with information about the next steps she needs to take in relation to their instruction.

Ashley uses observation as an assessment tool which she feels is more authentic because children are more engaged in something that they enjoy. She explained,

We have so many assessments that we're supposed to do that watching them play teaches you a lot of, 'Okay, when I'm not sitting over you watching you write your letter, and cut this, and say this word, how can you do it?' A lot of times they do it so much better when they're just on their own having fun. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 8, 2016)

She has found that students may perform differently based on the setting of the assessment.

Ashley has experienced more success with getting more accurate assessment results when children can demonstrate what they know through play experiences where they do not realize they are being assessed.

A final component that participants mentioned in relation to their role as an observer was their goal to judge appropriately when it is best to intervene and when it is best to leave children to work things out independently. When Courtney's students are playing together, she waits until adult intervention is necessary before involving herself in situations. She expressed,

I try to listen more than I help try to watch and see what's happening, and try to let them problem solve through things. And then I step in if I have to. I really try to let them take

responsibility for problem solving and figuring out what's going on, or how can they fix this, before I step in. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 12, 2016)

Her observation of her students helps her to know when they need her help and when they can handle a problem without adult help. Choosing opportune moments to interject in order to scaffold or support students is one of the goals when teachers use observation in their role as the guiding adult in play-based learning experiences.

Strategic planning of the classroom environment. An additional subtheme that participants identified as a component of their role in intentionally planning for play-based learning experiences was the way that they choose to plan their classroom learning environment. Several participants emphasized the importance of limiting available materials and explicitly teaching procedures early in the year so that children know how to effectively operate within their classroom environments. Lauren said,

We spend a lot of time going over exactly how to do the work, play the game, what they need to do to be able to be successful, and then, as the year goes on, more and more materials are out and they have more choices. At the beginning of it, I limit. (Personal communication with interviewee, August 2, 2016)

She believes that children need to have restrictions in the materials initially available to them as they learn how to use those materials and work on task with their peers. She mentioned that since too many materials can be overwhelming to children early in the year, she limits initially and then adds to them as the year progresses. The following photograph shows her classroom early in the year. The environment is uncluttered, and there are a limited number of materials available to children.



Figure 1. Limited materials available.

Gretchen also spends time teaching her students the appropriate procedures for her classroom. She noted, “They need to understand the routines of everything. They need to know the purpose of what everything is for. If they don’t know the purpose, then they’re not gonna do it the way it should be done” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 18, 2016).

Teaching students the appropriate methods for functioning in the classroom is important to Gretchen so that students will have meaningful experiences as they interact with the materials. Faith echoed the idea that excessive available materials can be overwhelming for students. She commented, “Just because it's kindergarten does not mean it has to be packed with stuff, because it's overwhelming for them at first” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 18, 2016). Faith cautions that teachers must be careful to not feel as if it is necessary to have excessive amounts of materials available to students at the beginning of the year.

In addition, the physical classroom environment, the psychological environment is also important to many participants. Dana said, “They just need to at least get that love and being comfortable in that environment” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 12, 2016). She explained that she designs her classroom with student comfort level in mind. The following

photograph from her classroom shows where she uses organized materials, bright colors, and soft seating options in the classroom library to help children feel they are in an inviting environment.



Figure 2. Creating an inviting environment.

Student comfort level is a priority for several participants. Ashley pointed out that having opportunities for play make environments more conducive for kindergarten children to have quality learning experiences. When referring to play-based learning, she said, “It makes the environment less stressful, more positive, and the kids are willing to do more academic work if there’s more play involved” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 8, 2016). Student motivation and engagement are critical for children to willingly participate in more structured learning experiences, and Ashley has found that providing an environment which incorporates play is beneficial for fostering that with her students.

As the participants design centers in their classrooms, they focus on the response that children will have when they interact with those parts of the classroom. Faith believes that teachers have a responsibility in designing their classroom and considering what should change if students are not engaging. She said,

I think every center or every part of the room has to be inviting, and if you see that your reading center is not being utilized, then the teacher has to take a step back and say, ‘Why

aren't my kids going over there? What is it that's not enticing them?' It has to be inviting, and it has to be comfortable, and it has to be non-institutional-looking. The environment's huge. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 18, 2016)

Faith places a very high priority on making certain that students have a learning environment which fosters the goals she has for them.

Dana pointed out that for her students to fully engage in the play-based learning opportunities that she provides, she must design a classroom environment that encourages such interactions. She explained,

If you have an environment that is very cold and the kids are very scared, they're not gonna play. Or, if they play, it's very timid and it's very shy, and when they're doing it like that they're not learning. They're playing in a shell. If you have a warm and a loving environment that kid's gonna be curious. That kid's gonna ask all the questions and he's gonna continue to want to know more, and not be afraid to ask or ask his friend, and it's just gonna be a warm learning classroom. (Personal communication, July 12, 2016)

Student comfort level is an important consideration for ensuring that students are able to engage in meaningful learning and feel comfortable taking risks.

Participants also mentioned the priority that they place on providing materials for students that are going to make the learning more meaningful. Bethany believes that the materials that teachers provide for students have a direct impact on the quality of their learning experiences. She said,

I think what we provide for them is gonna allow their play to be that much better. The more that we can provide, and the more meaningful we can make it – like, in the home

living to have paper and to have pens and markers for them to make grocery lists, or to play restaurant and take orders. I think that's really important that we put out all those things that will provide meaningful play. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 11, 2016)

In Bethany's experiences, she has found that students are more likely to engage in deeper learning experiences when they have the appropriate materials available. The following picture shows a portion of a kindergarten classroom where materials are available to encourage students to engage in meaningful literacy experiences.



Figure 3. Meaningful materials available.

Kelly commented on the idea that ultimately the goal is to provide materials that help students achieve meaningful learning. She said, “Everybody's different; everybody learns differently. So, they – things are available to them for what they need to achieve that goal” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 20, 2016). Different student needs warrant the need for different materials to be available. Kelly seeks to provide that variety for her students.

The physical set up of the classroom is also a priority for many of the participants. The teachers have found that it is necessary to consider where centers are placed within the classroom and how much space is appropriate to provide. Courtney said,

You have to set the room up so it's conducive for different centers because if everything is jammed up on top of each other, everything just flows over into the other place. So, you have to have a big enough space for everything and everything needs to have a space.

(Personal communication with interviewee, July 12, 2016)

Having a specified location for each type of play experience as well as providing enough physical space are both contributing factors to Courtney's classroom design. Jill also feels like spacious centers are important. She said, "I try to make them as big as possible so as many students can go to that as possible" (Personal communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016). For effective management, teachers have experienced the importance of having plenty of space available in each center.

Strategy when choosing placement of different centers is another role that participants take on when guiding their students through play-based learning. When describing her classroom, Elizabeth said, "There's something to do all around my room. It's not just, you know, centered in one place. I have tables strategically set away from the noisy things" (Personal communication with interviewee, July 15, 2016). For children to focus, they must have a classroom design that allows distractions to be minimized. Gretchen has a group of questions that she asks herself when designing her physical classroom environment. She listed those questions when she said,

Is the room laid out where it's easy for the children to move around? Is it easy for them to access things? Are they safe? Am I safe? Can we line up in that classroom? Can we easily come back into that classroom? Nothing in our way? I want them to feel like this is like their home for six and a half, seven hours a day. I want them to feel like they're

allowed to move around and to feel safe and comfortable. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 18, 2016)

If Gretchen can successfully answer these questions once her classroom is set up, she feels as though she has a quality classroom design for students. The photograph below shows a portion of Gretchen's classroom. She has these centers set up in a way that makes it possible for children to stay on task while playing beside each other. The classroom is arranged to encourage engaging play, while allowing for students to play safely and comfortably.



Figure 4. Strategic classroom design.

Hannah believes that quality classroom environments are not set up without effort on the part of the teacher. She described how she sets up her classroom when she said,

I definitely think there's a lot of thinking that goes into the classroom environment and how to set it up. I set my classroom up based on my centers. So, I have in mind what I want to go on, what centers – What I want them to be able to do in there, and then I arrange my classroom. I think the play really runs how I set up my classroom. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016)

Of the 12 participants in the study, 11 of them spoke about the role that the classroom environment plays in student learning. Those participants all felt responsibility as the guiding

adult in play-based learning experiences to provide a classroom environment that is designed to achieve the learning goals they have for their students.

Purposefully designed lesson planning. Many of the participants mentioned the opportunity to purposefully design lesson plans which incorporate play-based learning experiences which address academic standards as being a key part of their role as the adult. Several teachers expressed their positive experiences with working together with colleagues to accomplish their planning goals. Hannah said,

I feel like the more we've been really intentional with the games and stuff and the activities that we've put in during regular center time and math tub time. We spent a lot of time— okay, we're gonna find some resources. What are some games we can play, things that they can do? And I feel like they've grown so much faster just through that.

(Personal communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016)

In Hannah's classroom, she has experienced positive student growth which she attributes to the intentional planning of play-based learning. Bethany has also had encouraging experiences with her teaching team. She said, "They're very supportive, and my whole team is very similar in thinking that play is important, so it helps when we're planning to include play into our lessons and into our stations that we have" (Personal communication with interviewee, July 11, 2016).

Teachers in Bethany's school who share similar beliefs have been able to support one another in planning for play-based learning experiences.

Courtney and Irene have both seen in their experiences where working together with their colleagues has helped with coming up with new ideas. Courtney said,

We just do the best we can and we really do a good job, our team really does a good job of trying to plan together. And that helps a lot because we get a lot more activities and a

lot more ideas and we feel like we're spreading the wealth and everybody's not trying to come up and create something brand new on their own. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 12, 2016)

Teamwork among teachers has made it easier for Courtney to effectively implement play-based learning in her classroom. Irene has had similar experiences which she described when she said, "I love to plan together, and I love to bounce ideas off each other" (Personal communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016). Group planning has proven to be beneficial for several of the participants in the study.

As teams plan together, several of the participants noted the importance of intentionally seeking games and play-based activities with address the standards they are teaching. Lauren said that she selects activities where she knows that "the game truly has a purpose for what we need in the classroom" (Personal communication with interviewee, August 1, 2016). Play-based learning experiences must be selected purposefully to be most effective. Hannah's teaching team also works together to accomplish that goal. She said, "We'll take a standard or whatever we're working on, and we'll look for things that could possibly work in the classrooms. And I feel like that has helped so much bringing ideas to the table, so we can share everything. You're not looking for everything yourself" (Personal communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016). These participants often begin with the academic standard in mind when seeking play-based learning activities to use with their students.

Additionally, Kelly and Ashley commented on the importance of intentionally planning based on the knowledge that the teacher has of the children. Kelly said, "I'm a firm believer, and this is what – you take that child, you figure out where that child is, and you take it as far as you can go. You've got to have high expectations" (Personal communication with interviewee, July

20, 2016). She feels that it is key for teachers to be aware of student needs when planning to plan for a child to achieve maximum growth. Student needs, both academic and social, also contribute to teacher decisions about the ways that students are grouped.

Based on Ashley's experiences, strategic planning for student grouping is also critical. She said,

The grouping is huge. The ability grouping and just social grouping. I pair my students with friends that are gonna be nice to them. I learn quickly, as a teacher – you do – you learn quickly who works well together and who needs to be separated from who.

(Personal communication with interviewee, July 8, 2016)

She intentionally plans for student groupings which are going to be most conducive to meaningful learning experiences for her students. Intentional planning encompasses a variety of components. Several participants described a portion of their role as the guiding adult as intentionally working with colleagues to select learning activities which meet the needs of students as well as accomplish necessary academic standards.

Ability to differentiate. According to several of the participants, one of their roles as they intentionally plan for their classrooms is to use play-based learning experiences as an opportunity to differentiate student experiences within their classrooms. Ashley described how she can work more frequently with small groups while other students can participate independently in play-based learning. She said, "I can spend that 15 minutes just on their level. But I'm not preaching to the whole class. So, it's less on me and it's less on them, so it works out better for everybody. Direct instruction is much shorter" (Personal communication with interviewee, July 8, 2016). She has discovered that play-based learning in her classrooms frees

her up to work with smaller groups on a differentiated level since all children do not have the same needs.

Courtney and Elizabeth also mentioned the freedom that they have to differentiate with their students as a result of integrating play-based learning. Elizabeth said, “You differentiate a lot based on what the kids come in with” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 15, 2016). Since kindergarten students arrive at school with such a wide array of prior experiences, Elizabeth must monitor and adjust based on the experiences of her students when they arrive. Courtney explained how lack of differentiation is unfair for children on both ends of the spectrum. She said,

I think you have to look at the child and where they are. I think we're doing kids a grave injustice when they come in as readers and writers and can do math and we come in and we're still teaching the letter of the week. We're doing kids a grave injustice however, we also have kids coming in who don't know letters, don't know numbers and we've gotta bridge that gap. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 12, 2016)

Courtney believes that teachers have a responsibility to meet students where they are developmentally. Play-based learning helps her to look at children and determine the most effective ways to meet individual needs.

Several participants also described the ways that they differentiate when grouping children in their classroom. Hannah described why she sees the way she groups students as an important part of her role as the guiding adult in the classroom. She said, “I don't want kids all in the same level to be all in the same group. They're gonna learn a lot more from kids at different levels with different knowledge, and I switch groups up a lot” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016). She sees benefits for students not only from working with

peers on different ability levels, but also in working with a variety of peers. Ashley also groups her students heterogeneously. She said,

I pair my students. I make sure I pair them high, medium, low together. I differentiate them. They're all at different levels, so they're learning off of each other, especially the low ones off of the high ones. And the high ones are learning how to socially interact with the low ones because they're so much higher. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 8, 2016)

According to these participants, allowing children to work together and play together with peers on a variety of levels provides benefits for all children, including high performing students as well as children who have more academic needs.

Dana also noted that play-based learning allows her to differentiate based on needs other than academic level. In her classroom, she assigns centers for students based on the needs she has observed. She explained,

If you need to work more on social, I'm gonna put you in home living two out of the five days – or, two out of the four because you choose that fifth. If I think you need to practice letter formation or your fine motor, I'm gonna put you at the sand, and then you can play with that kinetic sand and get the feeling of that. Or if you need number sense, I can put you with the blocks and the manipulatives. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 12, 2016)

By differentiating free center assignments based on student needs, Dana feels she is taking advantage of the maximum benefit that play-based learning can provide. When children can play in an area that they are struggling with academically, they can make progress without realizing that they are working on their area of need.

The third theme highlighted how participants described the importance of intentionally planning for instruction in order to integrate play-based learning into standards based curriculum. Within that main theme, the seven subthemes of free play for exploration, integration of academic content, integration into learning centers, teacher as observer, strategic planning of the classroom environment, purposefully designed lesson plans, and the ability to differentiate emerged. These subthemes provide insight into the experiences that the participants have had specifically with intentionally planning for instruction which integrates play-based learning into their classrooms.

Theme Four: Classroom Interactions as a Key Component

The fourth theme provided understanding about answers related to the third research question, “What are participants’ descriptions of their role as the guiding adult in relation to student learning experiences in classrooms which are driven by standards-based curriculum?” Participants described the importance of scaffolding student learning in addition to providing effective classroom management as they interact with students in their classrooms during play-based learning experiences. Additionally, the subtheme of a supportive administration provided some understanding about the first research question, “How do select kindergarten teachers in a South Carolina school district describe their experiences integrating play-based learning experiences into their standards-driven curriculum?” The response from administration has been a key factor in the experiences that participants have had with integrating play-based learning.

Classroom management. The first subtheme in relation to interactions in the classroom was classroom management, which requires teachers to interact strategically with the students in their classrooms. Many of the participants see effective management of the classroom as one of their key roles when children are engaged in play-based learning experiences. Courtney

expressed her experience with the importance of spending time teaching procedures and expectations. She said,

That's what I feel like we spend those first couple of weeks on is just teaching, this is art and these are the things in art and these things go to art. And they don't go to ABC games and puzzles and just that they understand this is art, this is the things you use and you do it right here. So, they understand these are the things you can do during that time so that they understand what the parameters are for everything. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 12, 2016)

It is critical for the guiding adult in play-based learning experiences to ensure that children understand how logistics of how to participate in the experiences being provided. Hannah agreed with Courtney's experience. Hannah pointed out, "There's a lot of learning how to handle structure and routines" (Personal communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016).

Hannah and Courtney have both experienced the necessity of explicitly teaching kindergarten students how to function together in their environment.

One component of students working well within their environment is the ability to stay on task and work cooperatively with one another. There were multiple participants who alluded to their role in ensuring that the environment in their classroom encourages cooperation among the children. Lauren noted that it is important for the guiding adult "to monitor, to make sure they're playing correctly, make sure they are being kind to each other, and make sure that they are actually doing what they're supposed to be doing" (Personal communication with interviewee, August 1, 2016). Several of the participants noted that it is necessary to monitor young students closely for multiple reasons. Courtney said,

My number one my goal is to make sure everybody's safe and to make sure that no one is being unkind. Because I can totally teach and have ears listening to everybody else in the room too. My goal also is to make sure that people are working cooperatively, people aren't being left out, that I don't have any loners in the group that aren't trying to get themselves – because you always have a few of those that kinda just sit out there in the outlying area and just watch. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 12, 2016)

She commented on several behaviors that she monitors when she is the guiding adult in play-based learning experiences, since kindergarten students may need guidance in multiple ways.

Ashley echoed the ideas of her peers when she described her role as “walking around, making sure everybody’s doing what they’re supposed to be doing, actually on task” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 8, 2016). In addition, Hannah sees management as a part of her responsibility when students are engaged in play-based learning. She said, “My job is just to kind of manage and make sure that they’re on track, doing what they’re supposed to be doing” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016). As children are playing, she finds that it is imperative for her to offer guidance in ensuring all children are on task and working. Using adult interactions to provide a well-managed classroom for children to participate in play-based learning experiences is a responsibility that many participants described as important in their experiences in their classrooms.

Scaffolding through interactions with students. Another subtheme that emerged among participants’ experiences with classroom interactions was the importance of providing guidance to students during play-based learning experiences. Ashley described how she is changing her approach in her classroom. She said, “I definitely am turning more towards the less teacher instruction, and standing up in front of the classroom, and instructing, to more of the ‘let

them learn and play' and I guide them" (Personal communication with interviewee, July 8, 2016). As she has integrated more play into her classroom, Ashley has learned that her role can be more of a guide and less direct instruction. Gretchen sees her role as an encourager who can build student confidence through her interactions with her kindergarten students. She noted, "I think the most important academic needs are first of all that they feel confident about what they know. So, they can know a lot and not feel confident. But I think confidence is really important" (Personal communication with interviewee, July 18, 2016). She has found that through scaffolding her students, she can provide support that encourages a growing level of confidence for the children she teaches.

The participants described one component of their role as interacting with the students as they play. Elizabeth described how she scaffolds students in her classroom when she said,

I get down on the floor with the kids and play that are struggling with how to take turns or knowing which direction the board should go in. Or whatever activity or if they're reading a big book, I might go over there and say okay well I want to be a student. You read to me. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 15, 2016)

Through her interactions with the children, Elizabeth can encourage them to work on skills or characteristics that may be important for them based on what needs she has observed.

Facilitation of student learning was also mentioned by multiple participants. When describing her role in her classroom during play-based learning experiences, Faith said, "I think it's important to have conversation with the children, I facilitate" (Personal communication with interviewee, July 18, 2016). She pointed out that one role of teachers as guiding adults is to use conversation to scaffold student learning. Likewise, Bethany feels it is important for teachers to

encourage student growth without hindering learning that may occur naturally as they engage in play-based learning. She described her role as the guiding adult when she said,

I like to facilitate, maybe encourage, but I don't want to stop anything from happening; to hinder things from happening unless it's dangerous. I like to facilitate the play and maybe encourage some things, but I really like to see what they can do. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 11, 2016)

Through her interactions with her students, Bethany can see what the children are capable of with encouragement from the adults around them. Dana also commented on her belief that adults can scaffold children when they strategically interject during student learning experiences. She said, "I think if I can interject and say, 'What's a synonym for that?' or, 'Da-da-da-duh.' Sometimes I will interject when it's not interfering with their play" (Personal communication with interviewee, July 12, 2016). Both participants specifically mentioned the importance of only interjecting when it does not interfere with the natural interactions that children have as they play together.

Bethany's students often include her in their play, which provides her with an opportunity to scaffold their learning and encourage them to move in a certain direction. She said, "In home living, maybe they'll serve us snack, or whatever it may be, but then we move on to somebody else. But, we become part of the play, but still guiding that play at the same time...maybe to the next level" (Personal communication with interviewee, July 11, 2016). As she and her teaching assistant interact, even briefly, with students while they play, the adults can guide the experiences for the student and scaffold them toward higher levels.

As the guiding adult in her classroom, Courtney can make certain that all students find a way to be engaged and on task. When describing her interactions with reluctant learners, she

said, “My goal is to go over there and say, okay, these are the things you can do. What of these things interest you, and try to help them find some things that they can do” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 12, 2016). When her kindergarten students are resistant to engage in play-based learning, Courtney guides them to discover something that appeals to them and can help them to be successful. As they interact with their students, participants in the study described a variety of ways they can scaffold student development through play-based learning experiences.

Supportive administration. The final subtheme that emerged in relation to classroom interactions was the presence of a positive interactions with a supportive school administration. Eleven out of 12 teachers who were interviewed described their administration as promoting their use of play in their classrooms. Ashley described her administration’s response when she said, “She would come in and just praise how she liked the work environment in the classroom. It was very positive; it was comfortable” (Personal communication with interviewee July 8, 2016). Gretchen, Dana, Elizabeth, Faith, and Bethany all also specifically stated that they feel support from their administration in relation to play in their kindergarten classrooms. Gretchen pointed out that her administration expects to see it in her daily schedule. A large portion of the participants were very clear in expressing the support that they feel from their administration as they seek to integrate play-based learning into their standards based curriculum.

Some teachers expressed that while their administration is supportive, that has been a recent change. Courtney described her experiences at her school. She said,

We were kinda doing a little bit of planning for the upcoming school year, one of the things our principal who came to us and told us was that she really wanted to see more

play and more hands-on activities during center time and not so many worksheet kinda things. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016)

Although her administration is supportive, that has not always been the case. This is true for Irene as well. “I think our admin staff is very understanding, and they want to see us do more play, which has been a shift just in the last couple of years since I started” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016). Irene has more freedom to provide play-based learning opportunities for her children than in past years.

Several of the teachers mentioned the importance of understanding the purpose behind the play-based activity being provided for children. Courtney described the response she has received from her administration. She commented,

If a child does this what is it showing you? And if they've done it wrong what are you gonna do to go back and help them? When are you gonna do it? And so, she's kinda pushed us a little bit too to have more hands-on, have more play opportunities in our centers too. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 12, 2016)

In her school, Courtney’s administration wants teachers to be intentional in using the play to guide instruction. Hannah’s principal has also encouraged them to adopt a more play-based approach which minimizes worksheet-based activities. She said,

Our principal made a huge thing about no more papers and center time and stuff like that. And she wants it to be more play-based, which is great because I believe that’s how kids learn best. Our administrators are great, and they want that, so I think the focus on – They know if they’re playing this game, there’s a purpose behind it. They can tell. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016)

The shift in the administration's attitude aligns with Hannah's personal philosophy of teaching kindergarten. The kindergarten team at Kelly's school has shown student growth through the integration of play, which is one reason she believes that her administration is supportive. "I know we have not been questioned because we've shown the progress of the students" (Personal communication with interviewee, July 20, 2016). The student growth has made it easier to justify to administration.

However, some of the participants do have concerns that other individuals who enter their classrooms may not be as understanding. Lauren expressed this concern when she said,

Unfortunately, I wish that wasn't what I was always thinking. I'm like, 'Okay, does it really look like they are learning or does it look like they're playing?' And I wish I didn't have to think about that because I know what they're doing is helping them. To make sure that everyone that walks in the classroom knows that too is sometimes difficult.

(Personal communication with interviewee, August 1, 2016)

Hannah feels that many times the lack of an early childhood background can make this confusing for visitors to kindergarten classrooms. She said,

People that don't teach kindergarten or early childhood, come in and they're like, 'What are they doing? Are they teaching at all? They're just playing games all the time, playing blocks and stuff. But I feel like you have to have that early childhood background to know the importance of that development. They need that time to play; they need that time to socialize, so I feel like that's probably the most difficult thing. I feel like we could definitely make a case for 'Yes, they are learning, and we are doing what we're supposed to.' But it's just that – That fear of they're gonna come in and be

like, ‘This teacher’s not doing what they’re supposed to be doing.’ (Personal communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016)

It can be difficult for early childhood teachers to work around expectations from others who do not have a strong early childhood background. The quality of the interactions that teachers have with other adults can impact how play-based learning is implemented into their classrooms.

Participants described interactions as a key component in their experiences with integrating play-based learning into standards based curriculum. This fourth theme was further explained through the subthemes of scaffolding through interactions with students, classroom management, and supportive administrations. These varied interactions impacted the experiences that participants have had with the phenomenon.

Theme Five: Difficulties With Implementing Play-based Learning

The final theme provided an understanding of the experiences of the participants in relation to the fourth research question, “What challenges do participants face in making instructional decisions to meet the academic requirements resulting from standards-based curriculum while maintaining developmentally appropriate practice?” Teachers described a variety of subthemes which represented the difficulties that they face when seeking to integrate play-based learning effectively. The subthemes of time restrictions, developmental readiness of children, change over time, differing prior student experiences, and determining appropriate levels of student choice all emerged as components of teacher difficulties.

Time. The first difficulty which emerged as a subtheme was the lack of time to get everything accomplished. Teachers who participated in the study frequently cited difficulties with finding time to complete all that they want to during the school day. Irene very clearly shared her experiences when she said, “The hardest thing, I would say, is just finding time to get

it all in” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016). Expressing a similar sentiment, Kelly said, “We’re kinda locked in our timeframes, which can make it difficult” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 20, 2016). Even at the kindergarten level, teachers find themselves with many requirements which take up their time and can make it difficult to fit everything into a school day.

Because of this difficulty with time, play-based learning can often be the first thing that teachers tend to remove from their day. Jill said, “Play is one of the main things that gets taken if we haven’t gotten to everything on our list” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016). At the end of the day, Jill often must cut free play to fit in other requirements. Dana expressed similar experiences when she said, “Play – usually, that’s what everybody wants to cut and that’s what they want, and I just think that it shouldn’t be something that we cut. But we don’t have all the hours in the day” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 12, 2016). Although Dana is frustrated with play being minimized in classrooms, she acknowledged that the school day provides a limited time that teachers must work within. In Gretchen’s classroom, she strives to provide free play time daily, although she admits that it does not always happen. She said, “We have center time. We try to do it every day. We don’t get to it every day. I’ll be honest with you. I feel like there is so much that we need to get in that it is hard” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 18, 2016). All the participants who mentioned a struggle with finding time attributed their difficulty to the need they feel to meet high academic requirements.

For Hannah, the difficulty with finding time stems more specifically from the time that is required to teach children procedures for participating in play activities. She said, “They don’t play games anymore, they don’t play board games. They do not know how to play. So, I think

that is the biggest difficulty for me, is to have the time to teach them how to play the games” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016). For play to be meaningful, children must understand the appropriate way to participate. Finding time to teach children those skills is difficult for Hannah.

Another component of time that makes it difficult for teachers to consistently integrate play-based learning into their classrooms is the preparation time that is required prior to introducing the play experiences to the children. Hannah explained, “The time it takes to create games and stuff like that, just on the front end of it. I think that’s probably the biggest difficulty” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016). Although Hannah is optimistic that play can be incorporated into most academic content, she finds it difficult to arrange enough planning time to prep all necessary materials. Lauren has had similar experiences. She said, “I think just the time to figure out how to incorporate play, to find resources to help you think about... think through that. It just takes time, a lot of time” (Personal communication with interviewee, August 1, 2016). Teachers have many demands on their time, both when students are in the classroom and when they are not. Participants expressed frustration with several factors related to time which make it difficult for them to integrate play-based learning in their classrooms consistently.

Developmental readiness for content. The second difficulty which emerged as a subtheme is the developmental readiness level of the students. Many of the participants shared their beliefs that one difficulty they experience in their classrooms is the fact that many children are not developmentally ready for what is being expected of them academically. Jill commented, “So much more is expected of them that I don’t think they’re ready” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016). In addition, Faith noted, “We do a lot of things that I think,

with my philosophy, are developmentally inappropriate” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 18, 2016). These participants all share the belief that a lot of pressure is being placed on very young students academically. Ashley commented, “Even at five, they pick up on the pressure” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 18, 2016). These teachers all have difficulty in their classrooms because their beliefs about developmentally appropriate practice conflict with what they are being required to teach academically.

Some of the participants see the academic demands in kindergarten as being too developmentally advanced for the five-year olds in their classrooms. Hannah said, “I definitely do not think the majority of all kids are ready for a lot of the things that we’re forcing them to do” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016). Dana echoed Hannah’s frustration. She commented, “They put so much pressure on five-year old children and they don’t realize that they’re five years old. I think it’s absolutely ridiculous. They forget that they’re five” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 12, 2016). With the high academic requirements, Lauren said, “I do think that play is much more important than people are giving it credit for” (Personal communication with interviewee, August 1, 2016). The age of kindergarten children is a factor that several participants feel is important to consider.

Readiness for the content is a fluid characteristic among children. Courtney said, “You have to adapt the activities to meet the needs of the child. So, I think that that is the biggest thing that I have problems with” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 12, 2016). Courtney has had difficulty with maintaining her ability to meet student needs considering high academic requirements. Gretchen also pointed out that no two children are exactly alike. She said,

I think the idea of being ready is different for everybody. What I’m ready for and what you’re ready for are two different things when it comes to a certain skill or a certain

thing. But I think we do ask a lot of our kindergartners. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 18, 2016)

For Gretchen, it is important to consider where individual children are developmentally. Dana concurs with Gretchen's beliefs. She noted, "It depends on the child, and you're putting too much pressure on them, and they need time to be social, and to play" (Personal communication with interviewee, July 12, 2016). She explained that all children develop differently, and it is critical to take those needs into consideration when teaching children. She went on to say, "There's a difference if you're ready and if you're initiating it on your own. That's different to me. If you are initiating, you notice repeated addition, and you wanna name that multiplication when you're five years old, that's fine because you've noticed that" (Personal communication with interviewee, July 12, 2016). Children who are ready to move to more advanced concepts should be encouraged to excel, but all children are not developmentally ready. The variety of student needs was noted by many of the participants as one reason that academic expectations are sometimes too high for students in kindergarten classrooms.

Several of the teachers indicated the root of the pressure comes from the academic pressure that is placed on young children. Lauren said,

We're trying to push them too fast, so you know, they definitely – they need to know their sounds, and their letters, and all that, and you know, I do believe that they need to learn to read, but to me, I feel like we're pushing too fast for some of those children. In kindergarten, they should not have stress. (Personal communication with interviewee, August 2, 2016)

Developmentally Lauren does not see that her students are ready to meet the expectations for kindergarten. Hannah has a similar feeling. She commented,

My school's really based on academics a lot, but it's a hard balance for me to make sure that the kids are getting what they need, as well as not just forcing information down their throats. I think that the standards push too hard. I don't think – I mean, to me, they're doing first grade. I mean, things that developmentally, kids that are 7 and 8 probably need to be doing. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016)

Participants frequently shared frustrations with the conflict between academic expectations and developmental readiness. There can be a wide array of developmental levels among children entering kindergarten. Gretchen spoke about this when she said,

I think some children come in really mature and really ready to just do and take on whatever we have for them when they come. Some are just not ready. Some are just not ready. They're not ready immediately to start the process of learning how to read.

(Personal communication with interviewee, July 18, 2016)

These hefty academic requirements can make it difficult for teachers to cover all the content in developmentally appropriate ways. Lauren has observed children in her classroom who are simply not ready for all that it requires. She said,

I think that some of them, especially, the little boys, and especially, the younger little boys, but that doesn't count out little girls, either. They can't sit still. They're not ready to sit still in and listen for an extended period of time. Those little kids cannot sit still, and I had a couple this year that just really – they weren't – they didn't want to do their own thing, they just physically couldn't sit still. (Personal communication with interviewee, August 1, 2016)

Depending on developmental levels, some children are simply not ready for what is being expected of kindergarten children in today's classrooms. A large portion of the participants expressed their frustration with this difficulty which is a part of their daily reality.

Change over time. Different areas of change are the next subtheme which emerged in relation to the difficulties that teachers face. Teachers who participated in the study have noticed changes which have come in a variety of ways, but have all made it increasingly difficult to integrate play-based learning into their classrooms. Gretchen has taught kindergarten for 16 years, and she mentioned the vast changes she has seen in the years she has been teaching. Bethany, who used to teach first grade, has also noticed how the expectations for children have continually trickled downward. She said,

Just in the years that I've been teaching, we've kind of gotten away from the early childhood mentality and leaned more toward – we've gotten away from the social and the developmental. What I'm teaching in kindergarten was what I was teaching at the first year of first grade that I taught. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 11, 2016)

Over time, as expectations for children have changed in kindergarten, the focus and approach to kindergarten have also shifted.

Several teachers cited the increasing pressure as one reason that kindergarten has changed, making it more difficult to integrate play. At one time in Elizabeth's career she could teach children in a developmentally appropriate way, but she has seen where increasing expectations have made that more difficult. Courtney is also seasoned educator who has noticed a tremendous change in the expectations within her classroom. She explained,

Kindergarten is a different place than it was 23 years ago when I started teaching. It got hard to teach kindergarten. I think that it's much more academic now. Kindergarten now looks a lot like first grade did my fourth-year teaching. It's all about reading, writing and arithmetic. We feel like the fun has been sucked out of kindergarten because it is so academic at this point. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 12, 2016)

In the past, kindergarten was a place where children could make a transition to school in a way that addressed needs other than specifically academic issues. According to Courtney, that focus has transitioned. Bethany described the struggle that she sees in her classroom when she said,

We know that the standards are the standards, and we still have to get those in. And, so we, my assistant and I, often try to figure out, 'What should we do?' Because we know this is what they need, but this is what the state is telling us we need to be doing.

(Personal communication with interviewee, July 11, 2016)

As kindergarten has changed over time, Bethany explained the conflict that she feels between doing what is developmentally appropriate for her young students and meeting the academic expectations resulting from state standards.

Dana finds herself feeling frustrated by the expectations that are now being placed on her students. Like several other participants, she explained how it would be easier for her to incorporate play-based learning into her classroom if she did not have such intense pressure being placed on her young students. She commented,

You're not developmentally ready for this. They are five years old, they're putting too much pressure on these kids, and there's not enough – they underestimate how much we can do within the play and they're trying to cut play out. And we can incorporate so

much if we didn't have all the pressure. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 12, 2016)

The many requirements which face kindergarten students and teachers leaves Dana discouraged with trying to find the best ways to meet student needs in a developmentally appropriate way.

Lauren is somewhat optimistic that the pendulum may be swinging back toward developmentally appropriate practice. She explained how she believes that schools may be starting to understand again how critical it is for young children to have opportunities to engage in play-based learning experiences. She said,

I think that it is very important and I think that is very easy, in kindergarten, for them to believe they're just playing when they're actually really learning. I feel like we're starting to go back a little bit to realizing how important that is, because I do feel like, for a little while, that's been stripped out and it's been very focused on academics, academics, and I think that we're finally – I feel like the school system is finally realizing, wait a minute. They're missing out. They still need to play and that is how they learn. (Personal communication with interviewee, August 1, 2016)

Lauren believes strongly that children can learn much through play when they have those opportunities made available to them.

In addition to the changes in academic expectations, Kelly and Jill have also noticed a shift in the students themselves. Kelly said, "I think students have changed. And I think the parents have changed" (Personal communication with interviewee, July 20, 2016). Over the course of her career, she has seen a transformation. Jill explained in more detail the changes she has observed. She said,

It's definitely been a shift even in 10 years. Before I felt like they were a little more independent, I guess, and were able to interact with others, but now it just seems like they're more self-centered, I guess, because it's all about them. And it's about getting them to understand that there's a whole other class of kids – has definitely been a shift.

(Personal communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016)

Jill has encountered difficulties in her classroom because she finds herself having to teach children to co-exist with one another in the classroom. Changes in student behavior have caused changes in what must be taught in Jill's kindergarten classroom.

Differing prior experiences. Students come to kindergarten with such a spectrum of prior experiences that it can present difficulties to teachers who are trying to integrate play-based learning into their classrooms. Elizabeth said,

Unfortunately, because some of them don't come with a good foundation you're kind of all over the place with the kids. You've got kids that are coming in that know their letters, know how to spell their name. Then you've got kids that don't even recognize the letters in their name. They need a good foundation and unfortunately because some of them don't come with a good foundation you're kind of all over the place with the kids.

(Personal communication with interviewee, July 15, 2016)

The wide range of prior knowledge can make it increasingly difficult for teachers to design goals for their classroom that meet the needs of all students. Hannah has had similar experiences with groups of students that have varying levels of experiences prior to entering school. She said, "Obviously, our kids come in with different knowledge about reading and writing, what they can do, especially in kindergarten, because they come in from all over the place" (Personal

communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016). Students entering kindergarten differ greatly in the knowledge they have when they enter the classroom.

Several participants also noted that the lack of experience with non-academic skills can cause difficulties within their classrooms. Jill noted, “Not knowing social boundaries with other kids or how to sit on the floor. Things that you would think that they would come into kindergarten knowing, a lot of them don’t have” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016). Hannah has also experienced this lack of social knowledge, which she attributes to students’ lack of exposure outside of the home. She said, “There’s a lot of stay-at-home moms, too, which a lot of them do put them in preschool, but then you’ll have some that, they keep their kids home all five years. And – You can definitely tell” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016). When children begin kindergarten without strong social skill foundations, it impacts the classroom environment. Faith explained her perspective when she said, “You have some children that come in where parents haven’t interacted with them and they haven’t set them up for that social mind, to be able to fit into a group” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 18, 2016). She feels that parents need to place a high priority on helping students to be prepared to function successfully within a group setting. Gretchen has also found that students need instructions on basic life skills when they enter her classroom. She described some of the skills that she teaches when she said,

We’re teaching them basically the way in which to use a public restroom, how to use tissue, how to use hand sanitizer, the proper way to walk in a line, the proper way to sit on the carpet, the best way to listen, follow directions, and to take care of their belongings. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 18, 2016)

Since children need those basic skills to successfully function in a group environment, teachers must spend time explicitly teaching them. This can present itself as a difficulty when time is such a priority in classrooms.

Participants emphasized the role that parents play in providing their children with a solid foundation in the years before they start school. Gretchen said, “Some come and they’ve had experiences and they’ve had some lap reads and they’ve gone places and seen things. And some come, and it’s obvious that they haven’t had those experiences” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 18, 2016). Children who have had rich experiences in their first five years of life come to school with an advantage over those students who have not had the same opportunities. Bethany described her experiences when she said, “Kids need more exposure from home. They just don't have all the nursery rhymes and the songs that we used to sing growing up. They don't have that, so we have to instill that before we can start teaching reading” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 11, 2016). All children need those experiences, so teachers are left finding ways to provide them when they have not been present in the year leading up to school.

Courtney was very clear that she feels that parents play a pivotal role in ensuring that students are prepared for school when they get to kindergarten. Although having many academic skills prior to school may be helpful, it is not the most important thing, in her opinion. She said,

All those pre-reading activities, all the lap reading that parents can do and having experiences, not necessarily with holding pencils and holding crayons but playing in the dirt, using puzzles, playing with those we've gotta put the round peg in the round hole, just all of those developmental things that we do with preschoolers. I think those are the things that set the foundation for them for when they come into kindergarten. They need

that help to build that foundation for when they come to us. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 12, 2016)

Courtney has experienced parents becoming busier and busier over time, which in turn leads to fewer developmental experiences for students. She emphasized the importance of asking questions and interacting with children instead of always giving them a screen to keep them occupied. Courtney expressed strong feelings that parents must prioritize talking and playing with their children for them to be prepared to be successful in kindergarten. According to several participants, the differing levels of students' prior experiences present a difficulty when integrating play-based learning experiences into their classroom because student needs range on such a wide spectrum.

Student choice. One difficulty that teachers expressed with integrating play-based learning into standards based curriculum is determining how much student choice is appropriate when children are playing in free centers. Several teachers indicated that they choose for their students for various reasons. Courtney said, "They get free play. Now, I tell them where they have to go because our classes are so big, if I let everybody just go willy-nilly" (Personal communication with interviewee, July 12, 2016). She chooses because it makes classroom management easier, which is also a motivation for Elizabeth. She commented,

I think the only problem I've ever had is we assign centers. Because they go crazy or they'll fight. And I was here and they may have like got their book bag and blah, blah.

So, we'll assign centers, and we really try to rotate them (Personal communication with interviewee, July 15, 2016).

Elizabeth went on to say that while smoother classroom management is one motivation behind her choosing to assign centers, she also does that to encourage variety for her students. She said,

“We do have kids that would stay in the same centers. And I think it’s important for them to know how to play blocks, for them to know how to push cars” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 15, 2016). She has discovered that by selecting centers for her students she can provide a greater mixture in her students’ experiences.

While some participants indicated that they assign centers to minimize difficulties in their classrooms, there were some teachers who felt exactly the opposite. Hannah allows her students to choose their own free play experiences, which she has found to be valuable for her students. She noted, “I think that part has really been beneficial. Just letting them – And letting them choose, just the choice that you can play this game or you can play this game. Or you can do this, and then you can play with blocks or whatever you want to do with that” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016). From Hannah’s perspective, children gain from having that choice. Gretchen also allows her students to select their play-based learning activity during free play time in her classroom. She remarked, “I’ll let them choose. I think choice is important. Our motto is connect and collaborate and choice. And I think they need to have choice because they’re gonna have to make choices all their lives” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 18, 2016). Gretchen sees the choices they make in her classroom as a learning experience for future choices that her students will experience. Jill also echoed their beliefs, although she intervenes when she believes that it is necessary. She noted, “They can choose. And if I see that somebody’s picking over and over, I encourage them to branch out and go try other things” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016). Jill wants to allow for student choice in her classroom, but she also prioritizes encouraging students to experience an array of play-based learning experiences.

There are some participants who also communicated their ability to strike a balance between allowing choice and dictating play experiences for students. Dana said, “I want them to be well rounded, so I don’t let them choose every day. They choose on Fridays which centers they can go to, and then throughout the week I’ll choose for them” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 12, 2016). Dana feels both choice and well-roundedness are important for children, so she provides opportunities for both throughout the week. Bethany has also tended toward choosing for her students. She believes that it is important as a teacher for her to seek ways to give more control to her students and allow them to select their play options more freely. Bethany said,

In the past what I've done is, my kids get to free play, but I do encourage where they go, and partners that they're with. Of course, in their centers they are free to play however they want. I just would like for them to get to choose their partners, choose somebody that has the same interests as them, and go choose where they want to be. But, that's one of those control things for me. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 11, 2016)

Bethany is seeking to adjust how her students experience free play in her classroom while remaining within her level of comfort for control of the classroom environment. Determining the level of choice allowed for young kindergarten students has shown to be difficult for many of the participants in the study, and they have resolved that difficulty using an assortment of strategies.

This final theme provided insight into the difficulties that the participants described in their experiences with the phenomenon. Participants have had difficulty resulting from time constraints, the developmental readiness of the students for the content, change over time,

differing prior experiences of students, and integrating student choice into the classroom. Although all participants are intentional about integrating play-based learning into their standards-based curriculum, that integration is impacted by certain difficulties. The subthemes which make up this final main theme provide insight into the difficulties that teachers experience within their classrooms.

Research Question Responses

RQ1: How do select kindergarten teachers in a South Carolina school district describe their experiences integrating play-based learning experiences into their standards-driven curriculum?

The first research question for this study was designed to discover what experiences teachers have had with integrating play-based learning into their standards based kindergarten classrooms. The themes of intentional instructional planning and classroom interactions as a key component both provided understanding about this question. Several subthemes emerged within those two themes as teachers described their experiences with using play-based instructional strategies in their classrooms in a variety of ways in their classrooms. Free play was described by many participants as an essential component in providing play-based learning. Due to the high academic expectations for children, many teachers also described ways that they integrate curriculum into play experiences to make the content developmentally appropriate. Dana said, “You can learn so much through it if you can incorporate – it’s hard to incorporate academic through it, but at the same time, it’s not” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 12, 2016). Children who can play as they learn often experience more meaningful learning experiences than children who do not have play-based learning experiences.

Learning centers were another primary strategy that teachers cited as a method for integrating content with play. In Hannah's classroom, she integrates academic content into the play-based learning experiences that she is providing. She said,

We take our standards and take the content that we're gonna be teaching, and we incorporate it, just reinforcing it within games and activities and stuff. We do a lot in math. We have math tubs, and during math tubs, they're reinforcing whatever we've gone over, whatever standard it might be. (Personal communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016)

The play experiences are strategically designed to align with the academic standards that are being taught in any given week. The presence of a supportive administration was another key component in the experiences of the participants. This was frequently mentioned as a key factor in successfully integrating play-based learning into standards driven curriculum. Together, these four subthemes provided insight into the experiences that kindergarten teachers have with integrating play-based learning into their standards-based curriculum.

RQ2: How do participants describe the value of play in kindergarten classrooms which are driven by standards-based curriculum?

The second research question for this study was designed to discover the value that participants see from including play-based learning into the standards-based curriculum in their kindergarten classrooms. The themes of academic values and functional values of play both provided insight into this question. Values that were closely aligned to academic goals emerged as subthemes in addition to benefits which were more functional in nature. Communication was one functional benefit that participants described. Irene noted, "They learn how to communicate. It forces them to communicate" (Personal communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016).

Play-based learning improves communication skills which are foundational for many other skills. Increased engagement also emerged as a value of play-based learning. Elizabeth noted, “It keeps the kids engaged more. The kids are more interested, they're not bored, it's more hands-on, they're more focused” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 15, 2016). Children will only learn if they are engaged in the experiences, so play is valuable for the participants because it improves engagement.

Social skills and problem solving skills were also noted as being important. As students play in their classrooms, teachers have observed improved social skills which often correlated with practice with problem solving skills. Children can work together, which is valuable for multiple reasons. The participants have also seen a decrease in the fine motor skills of their young students, and play is an authentic way to provide the practice that is needed. Therefore, within the data, improved fine motor skills were frequently described. Finally, the benefits of play-based learning lead to more meaningful learning experiences for the kindergarten students in these classrooms. Play is valuable to the participants in the study because of the many benefits that they see for their students. The participants described their experiences with these benefits which have led them to prioritize and place a high value on play-based learning in their classrooms.

RQ3: What are participants’ descriptions of their role as the guiding adult in relation to student learning experiences in classrooms which are driven by standards-based curriculum?

The third research question for this study sought to understand participants’ experiences with their role as the guiding adult in classrooms which integrate play-based learning into standards-based curriculum. As with the first research question, the themes of intentional

instructional planning and classroom interactions as a key component interacted as they both provided some insight into this question. Participants had experiences which led them to communicate several subthemes about their roles when planning for their students to engage in play-based learning in addition to what is most important when interacting with students. Observation was the overarching role that teachers described for themselves in their classrooms. Dana feels that she can learn much from her students by only helping when it is necessary to intervene. She said, “I like it when they don’t really notice that I’m paying attention because then they can act, but then sometimes I interject when I think I can” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 12, 2016). As teachers observe and intervene when appropriate they can accomplish the other roles that emerged from the data. Additionally, the participants communicated their need to manage the classroom effectively, use the opportunity to differentiate for student needs, and interact to scaffold student growth. Those secondary roles can only be accomplished when the teachers are actively observing to identify student needs. A well-designed classroom environment was also a focus for teachers who participated in this study. They described the importance of strategically designing the classroom environment to make it manageable, comfortable, and meaningful for students. Through the experiences they shared, participants described several roles that teachers must take on when planning for and guiding play-based learning experiences in their classrooms.

RQ4: What challenges do participants face in making instructional decisions to meet the academic requirements resulting from standards-based curriculum while maintaining developmentally appropriate practice?

The fourth research question for this study was designed to understand the experiences of the participants who work through challenges as they strike a balance between meeting academic

standards included in standards-based curriculum while maintaining developmentally appropriate practice in their kindergarten classrooms. The theme of challenges to implementing play-based learning provided information about the experiences that teachers have had with overcoming difficulties. Participants discussed an array of factors that can make it difficult to implement play-based curriculum in their classrooms. Time was an overarching theme as teachers feel pressure to fit everything in with a limited time each day. In addition, varying degrees of prior student experiences provides a stumbling block for participants who want to make sure all student needs are met effectively. Furthermore, teachers must make decisions daily about the level of choice to allow for their kindergarten students within their classrooms, which is potentially a difficulty in kindergarten classrooms.

The developmental readiness of the students and change over time are interconnected ideas which emerged in the data. Participants have concerns about the developmental readiness of the children to meet increasing student expectations as they have observed change over time. Hannah said, “I feel like we shouldn’t be pushing them too, too much, too hard, too fast” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 19, 2016). Like many of her colleagues, she has concerns that the children aren’t ready for the expectations that are being placed upon them. Elizabeth said, “We have to do what we have to do, and I think there is pressure on us where at one time there was no pressure” (Personal communication with interviewee, July 15, 2016). The veteran teachers who participated in the study have all experienced the change over time that has led to higher expectations and therefore increased pressure for both teachers and children. This final research question provided insight into the daily struggles that the participants experience as they implement play-based learning into their classrooms.

Summary

The essence of participants' experiences with the phenomenon of integrating play-based learning into their early childhood classrooms was the focus of this study. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe kindergarten teachers' experiences with integrating play-based learning into standards-based academic curriculum in a school district in South Carolina. In this chapter, the results of the study were organized into themes that related to each of the four research questions which guided the study. Participants' experiences with integrating play-based learning, the value that participants see in the inclusion of play-based learning, the role of the adult as a guiding adult in play-based learning, and difficulties that arise when integrating play-based learning into standards-driven curriculum were all described in this chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The goal of this research is to add to the body of knowledge about the understandings and encounters that teachers have when they attempt to integrate play-based learning into their classrooms while meeting the high academic requirements that have been placed on their students. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe kindergarten teachers' experiences with integrating play-based learning into standards-based academic curriculum in a school district in South Carolina. The literature shows that there is a gap between theory and practice (Bulunuz, 2013), so this study was designed to provide some insight into why that gap exists. The findings in this study demonstrate how the theoretical constructs are still impacting early childhood classrooms. Additionally, the previous research is tied to the findings in the current study. Data was collected using interviews, a focus group, and analysis of photographs. Data analysis was conducted using memoing, identifying patterns, and discovering themes which emerged. This chapter describes a summary of the findings, a discussion of the results, implications of the study, limitations of the study, and suggestions for future research.

Summary of Findings

This study was based around four research questions. Five main themes emerged from the data, with multiple subthemes within each main theme. The first question was, "How do select kindergarten teachers in a South Carolina school district describe their experiences integrating play-based learning experiences into their standards-driven curriculum?" The answer to this question came through the third and fourth themes: intentional instructional planning and classroom interactions as a key component. Participants described several ways that they integrate play-based learning into their classrooms. Four subthemes emerged in answer to this

question. The number of participants who referred to each subtheme is included in Figure 5 below.

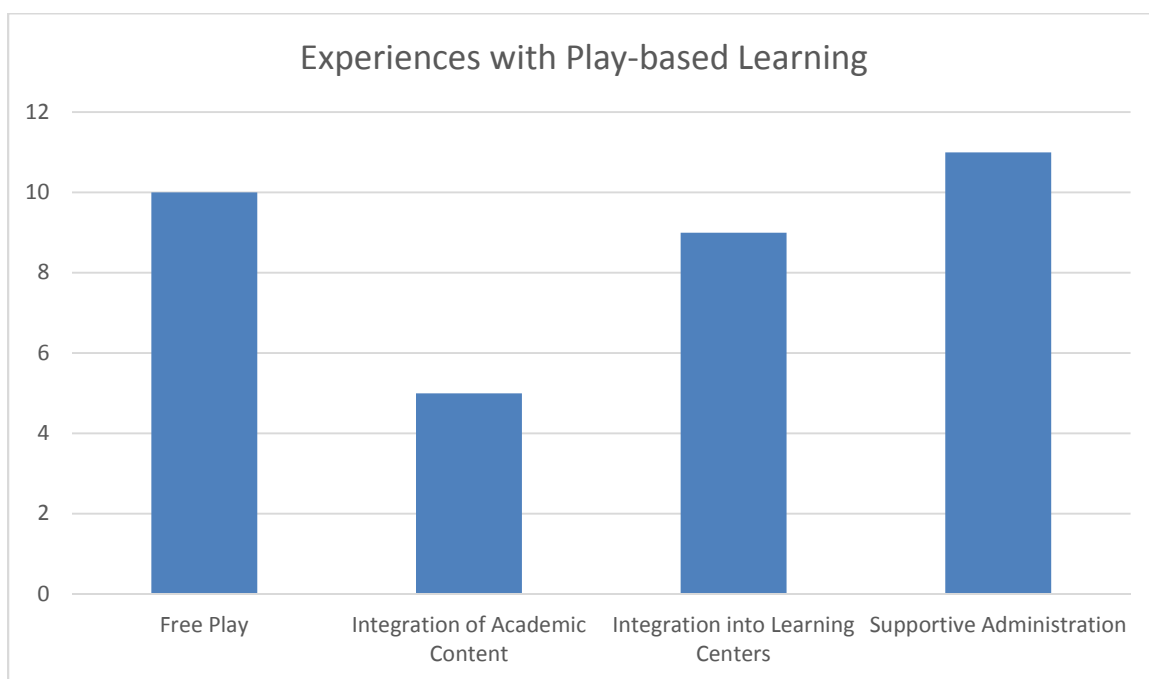


Figure 5. Frequency of play-based learning experiences.

The first subtheme is the use of free play. Ten out of 12 teachers who were interviewed mentioned the use of free play in their classrooms. Free play allows for their children to make choices in the ways they explore their own learning. Integration of academic content is the second subtheme which emerged to answer the first question. Participants explained how they begin with academic standards and add play-based learning activities to cover those standards, including exploration activities and games. Teachers provide play-based activities which allow children to practice the academic content that is being modeled throughout the school day.

In addition, 75% of participants described the third subtheme, which is integration of play into learning centers. Teachers described ways to design learning centers where children complete required work followed by free play time within the learning centers. They have found that using this strategy provides them with more time to work with small groups of students. The

fourth and final subtheme which emerged from the data in relation to teacher experiences was a supportive administration. For 11 out of 12 of the participants, the administrations at their school encourage and expect to see play in their kindergarten classrooms. For many of the participants, this outlook from administration has been a shift in recent years. The participants have experienced administrators who encourage them to be intentional in planning play-based learning experiences for their students which will be meaningful. They also mentioned experiencing concerns when visitors enter their classroom who do not have early childhood backgrounds, because there is sometimes a fear that those visitors will not understand the purpose behind what the children are doing in the classroom.

For this research question, the answers given by the participants were similar regardless of experience level or the student populations in their schools. Three out of the four subthemes related to this question were mentioned by 75% of the participants or more. Integration of academic content was mentioned less frequently than the others, but that concept was implied by many of the things that participants said about the ways they integrate play into their learning centers. Those two subthemes were interconnected. There was only one participant who mentioned the integration of academic content without speaking about integrating play into learning centers. In addition, the presence of a supportive administration was mentioned by a vast majority of the participants, which may be one reason that these teachers were willing to participate in the study. Teachers from schools with less supportive administrations may have been less inclined to participate or may integrate play-based learning less frequently than those teachers who are at schools where the administration is supportive.

The second research question asked, “How do participants describe the value of play in kindergarten classrooms which are driven by standards-based curriculum?” The first and second

themes provided information about this research question. Based on the data, six main subthemes emerged in the themes of academic values of play-based learning and functional values of play-based learning. The number of participants who expressed experiences with each of these subthemes is shown Figure 6 below.

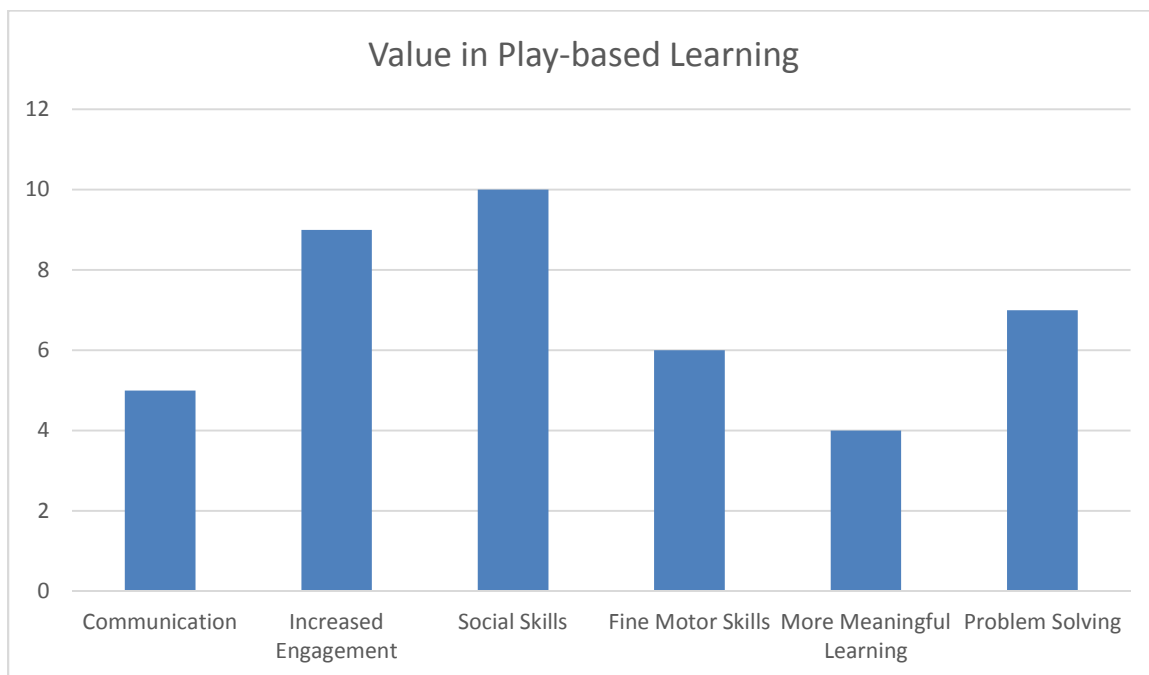


Figure 6. Frequency of values in play-based learning.

Nine out of the 12 participants included increased engagement among their students as one reason that they see play-based learning as valuable in their classrooms. Children are more focused because they are having fun and want to participate in the learning activities when they are play-based and hands on. Work ethic improves, and children's attitudes are more positive. As children can learn through less stressful activities, they demonstrate more willingness to work hard and produce higher quality work. This was mentioned by teachers who teach in schools with a variety of student demographics. Based on the experiences of these participants, the socioeconomic background of a child does not impact the fact that play-based learning increases student engagement.

Additionally, the subtheme of improved fine motor skills emerged in answer to this research question. This is another area where teachers have seen a decline in their students' abilities in recent years. Teachers also cited lack of exposure as a cause of the decreasing fine motor skills among their kindergarten students. Participants also have found that the increase in organized activities in children's lives as well as the overabundance of screen time for young children has negatively impacted their fine motor development. Children do not have as much time to explore and do things, therefore their fine motor skills are not as developed in kindergarten as they once were. In addition, there is less time within the school day to focus on fine motor skills, which has also had a detrimental effect on student growth.

The next subtheme which appeared in the data was the presence of more meaningful learning in classrooms where play-based learning is prevalent. Multiple participants mentioned academic growth among their students. They also have observed that play-based learning helps to make the environment more relaxed which encourages students to be risk takers. In addition, play helps students to internalize their learning more and come to deeper understandings of the content. This subtheme was the least common of the subthemes related to this question, and it was mentioned most frequently by newer teachers who have less than 10 years of experience. The final academic subtheme related to the value of play-based learning was an increase in time for working on problem solving skills. Children who engage in play have opportunities to be creative to formulate their own solutions to problems. They also demonstrate higher order thinking and improved confidence. Adults are frequently too quick to intervene to solve problems for children, and play allows them to problem solve on their own which encourages them to be more autonomous. This is a life skill which will carry on past the kindergarten classroom and will also improve social skills.

The first functional value of play that participants described is the increase in communication skills because of offering play-based learning experiences. Teachers described how students learn to socialize and learn by talking to one another as they play. It is interesting to note that the teachers with 10 years of experience or less did not note this theme in their responses at all. It was primarily mentioned by teachers who have between 11 and 20 years of teaching experience. Increased engagement was the second subtheme. Improved social skills were the next functional value that participants described based on the integration of play-based learning. When children play together, they learn to work together. As they collaborate during learning experiences, they learn to be cooperative with one another. This subtheme was described by 10 out of the 12 teachers who participated. Teachers indicated that they have seen a decline in the social skills of their students, which they attribute to a lack of exposure. Children who do not attend daycare or preschool tend to arrive at kindergarten with fewer skills or appropriate social interactions. This has left teacher with the responsibility for explicitly teaching social skills to their young learners.

The third question asked, “What are participants’ descriptions of their role as the guiding adult in relation to student learning experiences in classrooms which are driven by standards-based curriculum?” As with the first research question, this question was answered by subthemes within two overlapping themes: intentional instructional planning and classroom interactions as a key component. Participants described their role as the adult in six subthemes. The roles that participants described are shown in Figure 7 below.

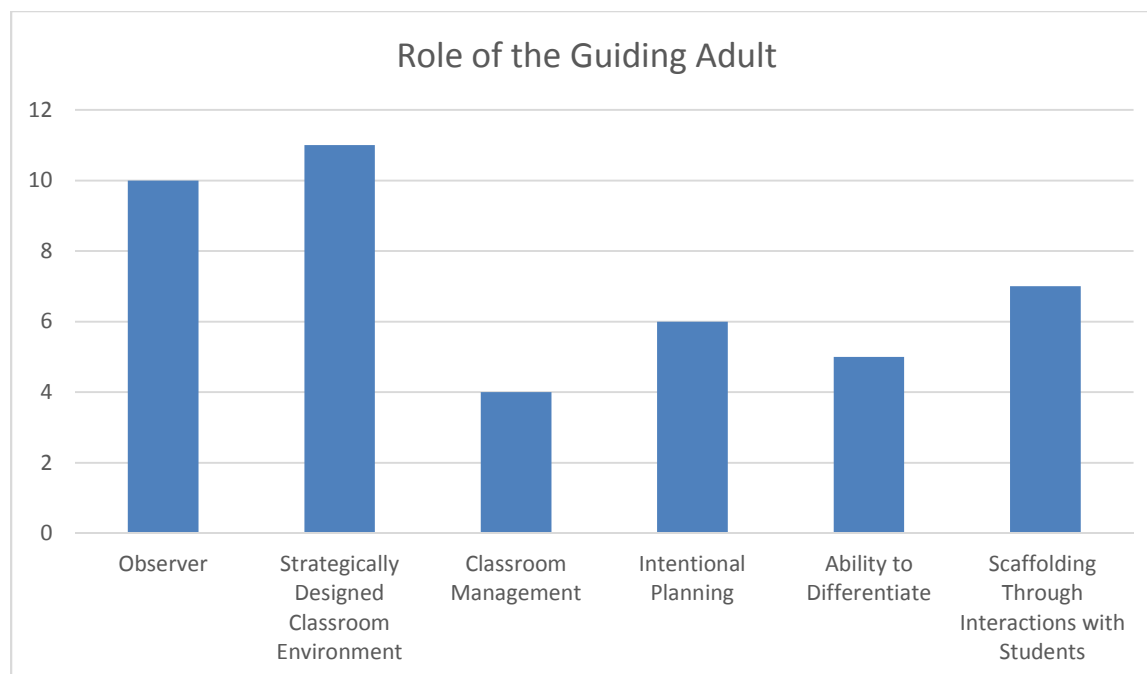


Figure 7. Frequency of subthemes related to the role of the guiding adult.

The first subtheme was the idea of teacher as observer. Teachers see themselves as observers who can use play-based learning times as opportunities to gain insight about the needs of their students. Participants described how they use the time to document strengths and weaknesses. Taking notes as children play serves as an authentic formative assessment tool. Based on their observations, teachers are also able to make judgements about appropriate times to intervene in student learning.

Strategically designing the classroom environment was the next subtheme in relation to the adult role in classrooms which integrate play-based learning. It is important for the environment to be engaging and inviting for students so that the wide variety of student needs can be met. A stress free, comfortable, loving environment was cited as being important. As teachers place furniture, it is important to do so in such a way to make classroom management more effective and efficient. Young children can be overwhelmed easily, so teachers must strategically choose which materials to make available to students based on their needs.

Participants noted that they limit the available supplies early in the year to allow time to explicitly teach procedures to ensure that students use those materials appropriately and in a meaningful way.

These first two subthemes were the most common among the subthemes related to the role of the guiding adult. Participants mentioned these two subthemes regardless of their experience level or the demographics of the students at the schools where they teach. Observing students and providing a strategically designed classroom environment were very clearly important components of the adult role across all categories of participants.

Strong classroom management was the third subtheme that emerged in relation to the role of the adult. Teachers have a responsibility to teach routines and procedures to help students to be successful in the classroom. Participants described the importance of encouraging cooperation, on task behavior, safety, and kindness. This subtheme was the least commonly mentioned in relation to this research question, but it is interesting to note that all the teachers who mentioned the importance of classroom management are teachers who work in schools with more affluent student populations. Furthermore, participants described purposefully designed lesson plans as a subtheme in their role as the guiding adult. It is important for teachers to work together with their colleagues to share ideas and resources. Teachers described using standards to purposefully select learning activities and games which would be meaningful for covering those standards. Participants intentionally plan instructional strategies and student groupings both based on information they have about student needs and development.

Next, the subtheme of differentiation was related to role of the teacher. Through the utilization of play-based learning teachers have more opportunities to work with small groups of students who are divided homogeneously and have similar needs. Differentiating allows the

teacher to meet their students where they are academically and developmentally. Groupings of students can also be heterogeneous to allow for higher and lower students to learn from one another. Sometimes it is also beneficial to group students based on non-academic criteria, such as a social skill that may be lacking. Play-based learning provides teachers with more opportunities to group students.

The final subtheme related to the role of the adult is the teacher's ability to scaffold students through their interactions with them. More guiding and less direct instruction is common in classrooms which integrate play-based learning. Teachers can encourage students and help to build their confidence through their interactions with the children. As teachers scaffold instruction for students, they can facilitate and encourage children to continue developing and to remain engaged in the learning. Through conversations with students, teachers learn when it is appropriate to interject and when they should allow children to continue without adult intervention.

The fourth and final research question which framed this study was, "What challenges do participants face in making instructional decisions to meet the academic requirements resulting from standards-based curriculum while maintaining developmentally appropriate practice?" This research question produced five main subthemes within the main theme of difficulties with implementing play-based learning. The number of participants who shared experiences with each of the subthemes is shown in Figure 8 below.

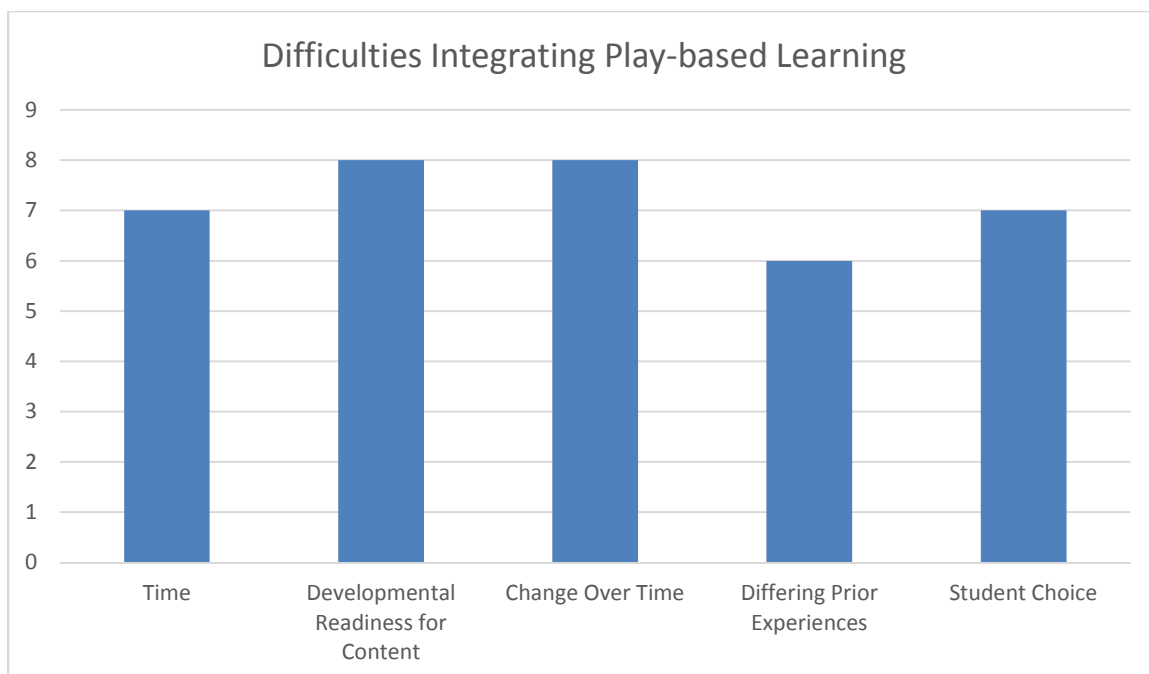


Figure 8. Frequency of difficulties when integrating play-based learning.

The first challenge for participants is time. It is difficult to find time in the school day for everything that is required. Often play is the first thing to be cut from classroom schedules when time is short because there are so many requirements being placed on students and teachers. In addition, time is a challenge because children do not inherently know how to play together in a classroom. Teachers must spend time intentionally teaching those skills to their young learners. Participants must also find time to locate and prepare resources and activities that integrate play-based learning, which can be more time consuming than other instructional methods.

Students' developmental readiness for content is the next subtheme that emerged in relation to this question. Many participants feel that the standards and expectations push too hard too fast. There is intense pressure even in kindergarten classrooms, and the children sense the pressure. Some of the requirements are developmentally inappropriate for five-year-old children. No two children are alike, and it can be very difficult to adapt the high standards to meet the varying needs of the learners in any classroom. The third difficulty that appeared as a

subtheme in the data is the change that has occurred over time in kindergarten. Expectations have trickled down, and children in kindergarten are experiencing more pressure than in the past. Although participants pointed out the learning power which is embedded in play, they also pointed out that the increasing pressures make it difficult to preserve play. Furthermore, some participants have seen increased self-centeredness in students which has also impacted experiences in classrooms.

The next subtheme which emerged as a difficulty for participants is the variation in prior experiences for students entering kindergarten. Many students are starting school with a lack of foundational academic skills. Also, social boundaries and the ability to interact with others is often lacking for students. Teachers find themselves forced to spend time teaching children how to co-exist in a classroom and basic life skills such as how to use a public restroom and how to sit in a group appropriately. Experiences with parents such as conversation and lap reads are very important for young children before they enter school, but unfortunately for many children those experiences are missing the first five years of life.

Determining the appropriate level of student choice was the final difficulty for teachers that arose as a subtheme. There were a variety of viewpoints from participants. Some see it as a priority to assign centers for management purposes and to encourage variety. Conversely, some participants make it a priority to allow children to choose their own play-based learning experiences. There are also some participants that alternate back and forth between teacher choice and student choice. Striking an appropriate balance for allowing choice is difficult for participants.

The subthemes which emerged in relation to the difficulties that teachers face appeared with similar frequencies. These subthemes were mentioned by somewhere between 50% and

67% of teachers who participated, which means at least half of all participants experienced each one of these difficulties. The breakdown of responses was even among teachers with varying levels of teaching experience and who teach at schools with varying demographics. It is also worth noting that change over time was mentioned by teachers with all levels of experience, including teachers with less than 10 years of teaching experience. Although the teachers with 20 or more years of experience may have described the changes they have seen differently, that is not a difficulty that is limited to teachers with extensive experience. The changes in kindergarten expectations have been felt even among teachers who have more limited experience.

Discussion

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe kindergarten teachers' experiences with integrating play-based learning into standards-based academic curriculum in a school district in South Carolina. Through interviews, a focus group, and analysis of photographs, this research provides great insight into the experiences that kindergarten teachers have had with the phenomenon of integrating play-based learning into their classrooms. Themes emerged related to the types of experiences teachers have had, the value they place on play-based learning, their role as the guiding adult, and the difficulties that are encountered when integrating play-based learning. This study has both theoretical and empirical implications.

Theoretical

This study confirmed that the theories of Vygotsky (1978) and Froebel (1896) are still very active in kindergarten classrooms. Vygotsky's theory of cognitive constructivism emphasizes the importance of the classroom environment and social interactions. Many participants explained their own beliefs which also value those components of their classroom. Participants described the importance of children having social interactions where they can work

within with a strategically designed classroom environment. Teachers also described their understanding of the importance of play as being a way that students work without realizing they are learning. They described strategies that they use to provide autonomy for students within clearly defined boundaries. These ideas all support Froebel's theories about early childhood education. Froebel noted that play is a child's work. He encouraged teachers to provide students with autonomy within defined boundaries. Teachers who participated in the study described similar views of the value of play in their classrooms.

Both Vygotsky and Froebel advocated for the importance of observation and scaffolding by the teacher for encouraging student growth. According to Vygotsky, teachers must observe students to understand the next steps to take as their instruction is scaffolded for them to continue working within their ZPD (Vygotsky, 2011; Wang & Hung, 2010). Froebel also advocated for observation to strategically design learning for students based on how they think, learn, grow, and develop (Manning, 2005; Reifel, 2011). Observation which leads to effective scaffolding is a key adult role which was described by many participants. Participants in the study described their experiences with using their observations to make instructional decisions about how to design instruction and questioning to promote student growth. Teachers also described the importance of using observations to determine when and how it is appropriate to provide scaffolding for students. Vygotsky and Froebel's theories have long been a part of the foundation of early childhood theory, and the findings from this study showed that teachers experience success with their students as they are continuing to abide by these theories.

Empirical

The research also confirmed many areas of research in the field. Participants' experiences with the nature of play and children's natural interests coincided with concepts

found in previous research. Previous research demonstrated that play improves student engagement, increases motivation, and provides for more meaningful experiences (Nitecki & Chung, 2013; Pyle & Bigelow, 2013; Stuber, 2007). Participants in this study also described their experiences with these same values for children who participate in play-based learning. Teachers described how play provides students with a certain level of control which is beneficial and removes the fear of failure. Improved student motivation and effort were experienced by the participants. These findings confirmed previous research which showed that increased student control in classrooms provided benefits for students (Nitecki & Chung, 2013). This research also confirmed the importance of play as a critical component in DAP in early childhood classrooms. Play provides a way for students to learn which encompassing the many unique needs that occur in early childhood (Jacobs, 2014; Kim, 2011). Participants in this study expressed their belief that play remains a key factor in DAP.

In addition, this study added to the research which shows that learning environments must be designed strategically to provide for optimal student growth (Roskos & Christie, 2013). The environment affects student learning, and participants described the importance of making choices which promote risk taking and increased confidence. Teachers supported the prior research (McLennan, 2011) through their discussion of the importance of providing meaningful materials which are varied to meet student needs and allow for exploration. Although previous research had mostly focused on which materials should be provided, these participants also indicated that choosing the quantity of materials is also important to avoid leaving students feeling overwhelmed.

Furthermore, appropriate adult interactions are key for quality early childhood learning experiences. The participants described their role in guiding play and having conversations with

students to gain insight into their learning and their needs. Adults can support and extend learning while finding the best starting points for new learning experiences. Teachers echoed the previous research (Fiorelli & Russ, 2012; Hyoven, 2011; Weisberg, Zosh, Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2013) when they discussed their role as an observer who learns about students and scaffolds their growth. They also emphasized their ability to differentiate for students and intentionally plan well designed learning activities which integrate play-based learning and academic goals.

Many of the cognitive and social benefits that were described in previous research were further supported through this study (Hatcher et al., 2012; Hyoven, 2011). This research provided further support to the idea that play-based learning provides a variety benefits for students in an authentic way while accounting for the developmental needs of kindergarten children. Children gain fine motor skills, language growth, and problem solving skills when they are afforded opportunities to play. They are increasingly engaged and provide higher quality work because they have less stressful learning environments. Additionally, students learn how to more effectively work together and cooperate within a group. Play allows for collaboration through social interactions in a way that other instructional strategies do not. These findings support previous research which focused on social skills and problem solving skills (Fiorelli & Russ, 2012).

Moreover, teachers spoke of their experiences as they struggle to meet academic requirements while maintaining DAP. Research had previously demonstrated that children benefit when teachers purposefully combine play and learning (Hatcher et al., 2012; Hyoven, 2011; Lee & Goh, 2012; Stuber, 2007). The participants described multiple ways that they intentionally integrate in their classrooms. This added to the body of knowledge which demonstrates that integration of play is effective for young children. Teachers in this study

described observing students engaged in more meaningful learning when play is involved in the learning. Play allows children to be hands on and to engage in their natural interests, which in turn makes the experience more meaningful for the students.

This study provides a new addition to the field of research because it provides an understanding of how some teachers are making play-based learning work in their classrooms. The previous body of research shows that there are many benefits for children who participate in play-based learning, which include cognitive benefits, improved social skills, increased language skills, and more meaningful learning experiences (Fiorelli & Russ, 2012; Hope-Southcott, 2013; Roskos & Christie, 2011; Roskos & Christie, 2013). Those benefits were then corroborated by the participants in the current research. Research has shown that a gap has emerged in theory and practice in many classrooms (Bulunuz, 2013). However, it is possible to integrate both DAP and high academic requirements. The participants in this study provided insight into some of the strategies which are most effective, as well as the struggles that are involved.

This research is beneficial for the field of early childhood education because stakeholders can look at the experiences of these participants to see how to better support other teachers who want to provide what is best for their kindergarten students but may need some support to find feasible ways to make it happen. The findings of this study corroborated with previous research in relation to the values found in play-based learning and the role of the adult. In addition, the participants illuminated some of the struggles that arise when they shared their experiences with limited time, changing expectations for students, developmental readiness of students, and varying levels of previous student experiences. Research has shown the gap between theory and practice (Bulunuz, 2013), and this study provides some insight into why that gap may exist in many classrooms by providing an understanding of the difficulties that teachers face.

Developing the greater understanding of why teachers find it difficult to integrate play into their classrooms is a benefit because it can allow all stakeholders to develop strategies for potentially improving some of those difficulties for teachers.

Implications

Theoretical

This study has a variety of implications for educators working with kindergarten students. This research provided more understanding of how Vygotsky and Froebel's theories are still in practice in current kindergarten classrooms. Components of both theories were described by participants when they explained their daily practices in their classrooms, although none of the participants mentioned the theorists specifically. These theories still serve as a critical component of the foundation of early childhood education. Teachers need to ensure that they continue to keep the foundational theories at the forefront of their instructional decision making. Administrators and other policy makers must ensure that they understand these theories when they are prescribing expectations for teachers and students. This study provided increased awareness of how those theories are still in use in kindergarten classrooms.

Empirical

There were a variety of areas where the experiences of the participants in the study added to the body of knowledge about play in early childhood classrooms. This research provided new understandings which confirmed much of what was already in the literature about the phenomenon of integrating play-based learning into standards-based curriculum. However, a part of the problem that framed this research is the gap that can exist between theory and practice. As teachers described their difficulties with implementing play-based learning into their classrooms more empirical understanding was gained about why that gap may exist in many

classrooms. Although the teachers who participated in this study all have chosen to overcome those difficulties for the benefit of their students, acknowledging the struggles that exist may help to provide some insight into why some teachers have removed play from their classrooms. Understanding the complications for teachers has implications for all stakeholders, as everyone involved has a role in making it more feasible for teachers to adequately meet all the needs that students, including academic needs and developmental needs.

Practical

There are a variety of difficulties that teachers expressed which provide some practical implications for early childhood educators moving forward. Administrators and other policy makers must consider the time restraints which teachers find themselves facing. There are only so many hours in a school day, and it is important for the best needs of the students to be prioritized when determining what is most important to keep in classrooms. Teachers must also be very strategic in choosing how to structure their school days to provide optimum learning benefits for students. Also, some policy makers either have limited knowledge of the developmental needs of the students or have lost sight of the role that child development plays in learning. There are many areas that children may not be developmentally ready for the expectations being placed upon them. Decision makers must consider these needs when outlining expectations for young students. Teachers have a responsibility to advocate for their young learners to ensure that expectations are kept reasonable.

Furthermore, students arrive at school with a variety of prior experiences, or a lack thereof. Parents need to be aware of the role that they play in preparing students to be successful in school and be intentional about providing students with varied experiences both academically and socially before they are old enough for kindergarten. Teachers have a responsibility to

identify where experiences may be lacking and be deliberate about doing all that they can to provide experiences to make up for the deficit that may exist. As with other areas, policy makers and administrators need to gain an understanding of the wide variety of student needs that teachers are attempting to meet. Simply acknowledging the range that exists may impact the way that educational leaders make certain decisions for students. Recognizing that many facets of kindergarten including expectations, parents, and the students themselves have changed over time should impact how decision makers approach policy making.

Delimitations and Limitations

One delimitation is that the study was restricted by teachers who teach full day kindergarten in a public school in a specific school district in South Carolina. In addition, teachers were delimited by the fact that they integrate play-based learning into their classrooms. The rationale for selecting participants from within this group was the fact that these individuals have experienced the phenomenon being studied. This allowed the phenomenon to be studied through data gathered from participants who have experienced the entire phenomenon. To experience the entire phenomenon, the teachers must integrate play-based learning as they teach in public schools which are required to abide by state academic standards. The participants in this study all teach in South Carolina, and are therefore bound by South Carolina state academic standards. A hermeneutical phenomenological approach was selected because it allows multiple perspectives to be used to gather data and identify themes.

This study was limited by the fact that all participants teach in a specific school district in South Carolina. These teachers all function under the same district and state requirements, which may have impacted some of their responses. Teachers from a different school district or state may have answered the questions differently. The fact that the participants were all white

females was another limitation. Male teachers or teachers of a different ethnicity may have experienced the phenomenon differently. The school district is in a suburban area, so teachers working in more rural or urban areas may have had contrasting experiences. In addition, the participants were all volunteers who self-reported themselves as teachers who implement play-based learning into their classrooms. The extent to which they implement play-based learning may vary among the participants, and could impact their responses.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the results of this study, there are further areas to research that would be beneficial for teachers and students. This study was conducted in a suburban school district. The same research could be replicated in other districts or states. Schools which may be more rural or more urban may impact teachers' experiences. Additionally, schools which operate under different state or district requirements may have varied experiences with play-based learning. Furthermore, it could also be helpful to conduct similar research in a private school setting to see what experiences teachers may have had with play-based learning when they are in teaching contexts which do not require them to adhere to state academic standards. Moreover, it may be useful to conduct research about the experiences of administrators in schools where teachers are seeking to implement play-based learning. The role of administration was mentioned in prior research, as well as in the responses from the participants in this study. Future research with administrators could make it possible to develop more understanding about administrators' concepts of early childhood learning, their experiences as they work with teachers who are seeking to implement play-based learning, and their perspectives on the role of play-based learning in their schools.

In addition, while this research focused on teachers who actively implement play-based learning in their classrooms, further research could be conducted with teachers who choose not to implement play-based learning in their kindergarten classrooms. Prior research as well as the experiences of some of the participants in this study indicate that there are many kindergarten teachers who have minimized or eliminated play-based learning in their classrooms. Identifying the reasons why teachers choose other instructional methods may provide information about how to best support teachers in implementing developmentally appropriate practice.

As with the current study, these recommendations for further research all seek to find out about lived experiences of the participants. The current study looked at finding themes among the combined lived experiences of kindergarten teachers. In future research, case studies of teachers who are particularly effective with play-based learning may provide a deeper insight for other teachers to learn significant strategies that they can implement in their own classrooms.

Summary

This research was conducted to help gain a deeper knowledge about the perceptions and experiences that teachers have when they work to integrate play-based learning into their classrooms while meeting the high academic requirements that have been placed on kindergarten children. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe kindergarten teachers' experiences with integrating play-based learning into standards-based academic curriculum in a school district in South Carolina. There are many important understandings that arose from this research.

The most important implication is the need for stakeholders to make decisions for young children after considering the unique needs of young students and the difficulties that teachers face when seeking to meet these needs. These adjustments need to be made by considering the

potential benefits for children who are exposed to developmentally appropriate experiences as well as the difficulties that teachers face when trying to meet standards-based curriculum requirements while maintaining DAP. Student needs and DAP should be considered when guidelines are being designed which impact kindergarten children. Teachers find themselves in difficult situations when they have limited time, but see themselves being torn between following their beliefs about student developmental needs and being forced to try to facilitate student growth toward extremely high academic expectations. The participants expressed a variety of values that result from providing play-based learning opportunities for children. Although these teachers shared experiences with successfully using those strategies to integrate play with standards-based curriculum, there was a shared concern among many of the participants that the increasing standards-based expectations are getting much too high and are not developmentally appropriate for their young students.

Teachers understand the benefits of play for young children, but they often find themselves in challenging situations due to time constraints, the developmental readiness of their students, differing prior student experiences, and the changes that have occurred over time in various aspects of education. Using the information that teachers can provide about their experiences can help administrators, parents, and policy makers to all understand their role and adjust their actions to better support teachers and ultimately benefit the students. It is very important for all stakeholders to consider the difficulties that teachers face when determining how to best support teachers so that children reap the benefits of engaging in developmentally appropriate play-based learning experiences in their kindergarten classrooms.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Consent Form

The following consent form was taken from and adapted from Liberty University IRB website.
<https://www.liberty.edu/index.cfm?PID=12837>

Consent Form

“Teachers’ Experiences with Integrating Play-Based Learning Into Standards-Driven Curriculum: A Phenomenological Study”

Mary Beth Nugent
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study of how teachers describe their experiences with integrating play-based learning experiences into curriculum which is driven by academic standards. You were selected as a possible participant because you have experience with integrating play-based learning into your kindergarten classroom. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Mary Beth Nugent through the Department of Education at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to understand kindergarten teachers’ experiences with integrating play-based learning experiences into standards-driven academic curriculum. This study will consider the role of adults in play-based learning experiences, the value that teachers place on play-based learning, and the struggles that teachers may face when making instructional decisions in their classrooms. This research can help to inform leaders about the best ways to support teachers in the classroom. Participation is voluntary.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things: You will be interviewed individually and audio recorded. You will be given the option to participate in a focus group with the other participants in the study. I will take pictures of the learning environment in your classroom when your students are not present. Once the study is written, you will be given the opportunity to review the findings prior to final publication.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:

There are no major known risks from participating in this study. Any risk that could occur is no more than you would encounter in everyday life. The benefits to participation are the opportunity

to participate in a qualitative research study and the information that can be gained about how to best support kindergarten teachers.

Compensation:

You will not receive payment for participating in the study.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records. Electronic data will be stored in password protected files. Hard copies of data will be stored in secure cabinet which only the researcher will have access to. The researcher cannot assure that all participants in the focus group will maintain privacy and confidentiality.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or [REDACTED]. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is Mary Beth Nugent. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her by email at methridge@liberty.edu or by phone at [REDACTED]. In addition, Dr. Ralph Marino is the faculty advisor for this study. You may contact him at by email at rmarino@liberty or by phone at [REDACTED].

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Suite 1837, Lynchburg, VA 24502 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

I further agree to be audio recorded during my interview and the focus group.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____ Date: _____

Appendix B: IRB Approval Letter**LIBERTY UNIVERSITY**
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

5/26/2016

Mary Beth Nugent

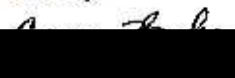
IRB Approval 2541.052616: Teachers' Experiences with Integrating Play-Based Learning into Standards-driven Curriculum: A Phenomenological Study

Dear Mary Beth Nugent,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,



Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
The Graduate School

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Appendix C: Research Site Permission Letter



October 23, 2015

Ms. Mary Beth Nugent, Liberty University
[REDACTED]

The Research Review Committee of School [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] has received your study request regarding **kindergarten teachers' perspectives on integrating play-based learning experience into standards-driven curriculum**. You do not need our permission to survey our teachers. **Please be reminded that School District [REDACTED] has not endorsed your study.** In addition, our teachers have the right to decline participation in your study. If you have any questions, please contact me at your earliest convenience. Our district staff directory is available online:
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] wishes you good luck with the study and your academic career. If you have any questions or need further assistance, please contact me at [REDACTED] or at [REDACTED]

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]
Research Review Committee Chair
Office of Accountability

Appendix D: Interview Questions

The following questions will serve as a basis for the interview guide:

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. More specifically, tell me a little about your teaching background and experience.
3. What do you see as the most important developmental and academic needs for kindergarten students?
4. How would you describe the role of play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms?
5. What experiences have you had with integrating play-based learning experiences into your classroom?
6. What positive or negative impact have those experiences had on your students' achievement?
7. What do you view your role as the adult in your students' learning experiences?
8. What role do you believe the learning environment plays in student achievement?
9. What difficulties, if any, do you face in integrating play-based learning experiences into your classroom?
10. If I have any other questions, may I contact you through phone or email?

In addition, possible follow-up questions will include:

1. What do you mean by...?
2. Would you please tell me more about that?
3. How do you feel about...?
4. What has led to your conclusions about...?

Appendix E: Researcher's Reflective Log Excerpt

7-18-16 Today was my interview with Gretchen, who is a very experienced kindergarten teacher. She focused a lot on the needs that students have in addition to academic needs. With her many years of teaching, she has seen lots of changes in education, including changing strategies, tools, and expectations. With all of those changes, she still spoke a lot about her beliefs that children still need opportunities to play. I have completed quite a few interviews at this point, and I am enjoying hearing the experiences of many of my colleagues. I am hearing many teachers who share some of the same struggles that I feel in my own classroom. It is also fulfilling to listen to other teachers share how they overcome some of the struggles that I have also experienced. I am being very conscious of keeping my own experiences to myself as I listen to the participants share their experiences.

7-19-16 I completed three more interviews today. The first interview was this morning with Hannah. She is one of the most talkative participants that I have had so far. She is young, and her teaching experience is more limited, but she had a lot to share with me. She was very eager and willing to answer my questions. I found the flow of this interview was easier because she was so cooperative with sharing her own experiences. The conversation with Hannah was easy and more relaxed than some other interviews I have had. Hannah and I share similar views about many things related to teaching kindergarten, so it made this interview very pleasant for me. I enjoyed listening to Hannah as she shared her experiences.

I completed two more interviews this afternoon. I met with Irene and Jill. Both of those interviews were more difficult than some previous interviews. Although Irene described her experiences with the phenomenon and answered my questions, she did have less to say than the other participants I have interviewed so far. I am not entirely sure of why she had less to say, but she did seem nervous. During the interview, I was very conscious to make sure that my body language and tone conveyed the message that I just wanted to hear her experiences. Jill was a very reserved person, and I believe that is what impacted the way she answered my questions. Both of these participants did share their experiences, even though they were less talkative than some of the other participants.

I am starting to hear some the same things from multiple participants. The need for social skills and teachers' lack of time are the two things that seem to be arising very frequently. I find myself identifying with the teachers a lot, and I am very conscious of making sure that I keep my thoughts and opinions out of the conversations. Even as I ask follow up questions, I am very intentional about only seeking information about their experiences without putting my own experiences into it. It seems that the same struggles exist among multiple schools and teachers. I look forward to beginning to look at the data. I am eager to begin to look for themes that may arise when I have the opportunity to look closely at the data to see what actually arises as themes.

Appendix F: Focus Group Questions

The following questions will serve as a basis for the focus group discussion:

1. Please share with the group your name, school, and experience teaching.
2. Please share experiences that you have had with play-based learning in your classroom.
3. Describe how effective or ineffective that you felt that those learning experiences were.
4. Describe the positive experiences that you've had with integrating play-based learning in your classroom
5. Tell me about disappointments that you have had with integrating play-based learning into your classroom.
6. What difficulties do you face with integrating play-based learning experiences into your classroom?
7. What are important components of the learning environment in your classroom?
8. How does adult support influence play-based learning experiences?
9. What do you see as the advantages or disadvantages of play-based leaning in your classroom?
10. Is there anything else that you would like to share about your experiences with integrating play-based learning into your classroom?

In addition, possible follow-up questions will include:

1. What do you mean by...?
2. Would you please tell me more about that?
3. How do you feel about...?
4. What has led to your conclusions about...?