TEACHER EXPERIENCES ON THE PLAY BASED METHODS AND
INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES USED IN HALF VS. FULL DAY KINDERGARTEN

A dissertation presented

By

Gina E. Williams

to

The College of Professional Studies School of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

In the field of

Educational Leadership

College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
March 2017
Abstract

The purpose of this case study was to examine the play based teaching and learning methods at one particular elementary school in southeastern Massachusetts with the aim of identifying methods and practices that are seen as essential in developing the academic and social skills in kindergarten students. This school of study has been utilizing multiple approaches driven by budget, state mandates, and administrative decision making. The intrinsic case study was designed to analyze perceptions of kindergarten teachers with respect to their thoughts and believes on the most developmentally appropriate and effective way to teach academic and social skills to kindergarten students. Data were obtained through interviews, classroom observations, and a review of professional development offerings in the school district.

Key Words: Play-based learning, kindergarten, early childhood, child development, teacher perception, case study
Acknowledgements

I have finally reached the end of seven plus years’ worth of work to get to this place. There were many days when I never thought it would happen, but I made it. I would never have been able to finish my dissertation without the guidance of my advisor, Dr. Nancy Young, encouragement from my colleague and NEU counterpart, Dr. Susan Cote, and support from my friends and family. I truly appreciate the cooperation of my Central School friends, Deb, Mary, Lauren, and Sandi in helping me collect my research data. My research project would not have been possible without their help and Central School will always hold a special place in my heart.

I would like to thank my parents, Peter and Peg Spagone and my siblings, Peter, Michelle, and Jill. They have always supported me in all my endeavors and their words of wisdom and encouragement have made me the person I am today. I have great admiration for all of them. I would also like to thank my husband, Tom. He has spent many days and hours fulfilling the role as both mom and dad to our sons while I sat at the computer and he never once complained. He was always there calming me and cheering me up through the worst moments of writing and rewriting. I am extremely lucky to be able to call him my husband.

Finally, to my three sons, Aidan, Gage, and Logan, who have been my inspirations to complete this work. Although they may never read this dissertation in its entirety, I hope seeing the amount of hours, days, weeks, months, and years I have dedicated to this work inspires them to never give up on their dreams, always work to their fullest potential, and know that anything is possible.
# Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................................................. 2

Acknowledgements ................................................................................................................................. 3

**Chapter One: Introduction** .............................................................................................................. 7

Statement of the Problemé  .................................................................................................................. 7

Significanceé  ......................................................................................................................................... 8

Positionality Statementé  ...................................................................................................................... 11

Research Questioné  ............................................................................................................................ 12

Theoretical Frameworké  ...................................................................................................................... 12

**Chapter Two: Literature Review** .................................................................................................... 18

Introductioné  ......................................................................................................................................... 18

Kindergarten: A Changing Paradigmé  ............................................................................................... 19

The Academic Benefits of a Full Day Kindergarten Programé  ................................................................ 22

  Instructional Comparisonsé  .............................................................................................................. 27

  Usage of Instructional Timeé  .......................................................................................................... 31

The Social Benefits of a Full Day Kindergarten Programé  .................................................................... 34

Summaryé  .............................................................................................................................................. 38

**Chapter Three: Research Design** ..................................................................................................... 41

Methodologyé  ...................................................................................................................................... 41

Research Designé  ............................................................................................................................... 42
Concluding Remarks  108
References  111
Appendices  121
Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Changes in American society (one parent and dually employed parent households) have led to the increasing popularity of, and demand for, full-day kindergarten programs (Children's Defense Fund, 1996).

In addition to the social need for child care, there has been an academic need to strengthen skills in literacy. One of the focal areas of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was the strengthening of our nation’s early literacy programs. In addition to greater gains in learning, full-day kindergarteners exhibit more independent learning, classroom involvement, productivity in work with peers and reflectiveness than half-day kindergarteners (Cryan, John R., Sheehan, Robert, Wiechel, Jane, & Brandy-Hedden, Irene G. 1992). Many state and federal funds earmarked for these programs have declined since the early 2000s (The Boston Globe, 2009). A large number of children are unable to access a full-day kindergarten program particularly students from low income families. These children are most often the ones who do not attend full-day programs because their families are unable to pay the fee for the additional half-day. In the 2012-2013 school year 94% or 290 of the 310 school districts serving kindergarten-aged children in the state of Massachusetts offered at least one full-day kindergarten classroom. Of these, 34% or 216 offer full-day kindergarten district-wide while 74 offer it partially and maintain some half-day classrooms. When districts only partially offer full-day kindergarten there is often a high demand with limited spaces, requiring a lottery or wait list. If districts cannot afford to offer full-day kindergarten programs parents must pay a tuition cost.
The obligation for school districts to meet the student achievement demands of federal (No Child Left Behind) and state (MCAS, PARRC) mandates have created higher accountability for teachers to focus on standards and formal assessments in order for students to attain higher achievement levels in the lower grades. The increased expectations in kindergarten have led policy makers, school leaders, and parents to advocate for full-day kindergarten programs in order to provide students with more time to acquire the needed skills. Empirical evidence clearly shows that children who attend full-day kindergarten programs are more academically and socially successful by grade three than children who attend half-day programs.

Although full-day kindergarten provides more time for students to acquire the needed social and academic skills how do teachers navigate the components of play and its relationship to the increased emphasis on learning? Are there differences in what teachers believe should be taught and what the curriculum requires them to teach? How do these beliefs affect the values of teachers? This study will investigate the heart and passions of kindergarten teachers who have experienced both full and half-day programs by giving them voice to capture their experiences.

The audiences that will benefit from the study will be policy makers, legislatures, school administration, higher education, public school practitioners, parents, and students.

Significance

The significance of this problem has implications on local, state, national, and international levels. The national implications resulting from the limited availability of full day kindergarten for some but not all students represents an issue of equity. Horace Mann, in his
1848 Annual Report to the Massachusetts State Board of Education stated, “Education then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance-wheel of the social machinery” (p.1). The issue of equity is currently embedded in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 which supports standards based education with high academic standards, measurable goals, and assessments of basic skills. The accountability of all students to adhere to these standards exists regardless of whether or not they have attended a full or half-day kindergarten program.

The results of this inequity are evidenced by research on the national levels that demonstrates that students in a full-day kindergarten program show greater reading and mathematics achievement gains than those in half-day classes. In their landmark longitudinal study of full-day versus half-day kindergarten, researchers Jill Watson and Jerry West (2012) found that students in full-day classes learned more in both reading and mathematics than those in half-day classes. At-risk students who received full-day kindergarten through the Kindergarten Initiative in Montgomery County, Maryland made significantly greater progress in language proficiency than comparable children in half-day kindergarten (Nielsen, Jennifer & Cooper-Martin, Elizabeth. 2002). Although some debate does appear in the literature regarding who might best benefit from full-day kindergarten Housden and Kim (1992) and Fromboluti (1988) both argue that a developmentally appropriate full-day kindergarten program benefits all children both academically and socially, but it is especially beneficial to children from low socioeconomic or educationally disadvantaged backgrounds (da Costa & Bell, 2001).

On the state level the significant demand for full day kindergarten programs is evidenced by factors that led eighty-one percent of Massachusetts’ voters to support full-day kindergarten
for all Massachusetts children (Opinion Dynamics Poll of MA voters, 2003). According to the Opinion Dynamics Early Education Parent Survey of 2006 among parents who reported that their communities do not offer full-day kindergarten, 61% said they would rather send their child to full-day kindergarten than half-day kindergarten. In 2000, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts began a long-term plan to support cities and towns to transition to full-day kindergarten by creating a Massachusetts Department of Education Kindergarten Development Grant Program. Public school districts in Massachusetts can receive two types of Kindergarten Development Grants. The Transition Planning for Full-Day Kindergarten grant helps districts with start-up costs, professional development, and curriculum development to transition from half-day kindergarten to full-day kindergarten. The Quality Full-Day Kindergarten Grant supports quality improvements such as increased staff, special needs inclusion, transition planning, and expanded professional development in full-day kindergarten programs. These grant costs have peaked at $33.8 million in fiscal year 2008. There is also the Early Education for All Campaign, which works to ensure that children in Massachusetts have access to high-quality early education and become proficient readers by the end of third grade. The EEA is a coalition of leaders from business, early childhood, labor, religion, and health care paired with parents and policy makers on behalf of children and families to seek high quality early childhood programming including high-quality full-day kindergarten. Despite state funding efforts, on the local level many schools must utilize a lottery system to access a tuition-based full-day kindergarten program.

On local levels school districts are balancing the demand for full day kindergarten with the availability of classroom space and funding. Lottery systems have been developed to provide
a non-discriminating process for determining which students will receive a full day kindergarten experiences knowing it’s not possible for all or as many that are interested.

The topic of high quality full-day kindergarten has been researched and tested for well over a decade. Millions of dollars have been invested in assisting with the creation of full-day kindergarten in communities. Parents, educators, politicians, and policy makers have been advocating for full-day kindergarten because of the academic and social gains that are being reported in long-term studies. But in 2013 the grant funding dried up, leaving communities to struggle to afford free full-day kindergarten for all students, and parents are faced with the burden of paying out of pocket for their child to attend full-day kindergarten. Educational Policy-makers will be well advised of learning what early educational teachers aspire to accomplish given the difficulties of current expectation.

**Positionality Statement**

As an administrator practitioner, the researcher has personal biases that will need to be addressed. This researcher supervises and evaluates the teachers that will be the participants of the study. As an overseer of the organizational structure of the kindergarten program, this researcher has been working to transition half-day kindergarten classrooms into full-day kindergarten classrooms. My perspective on the importance of a full-day kindergarten program being more beneficial than a half-day kindergarten program is well supported by data but will require me to collect and interpret the data in a manner that acknowledges my beliefs by remaining vigilant in order not to constrain the production of knowledge.
Beyond the known academic benefits of a full-day Kindergarten program, the relationship between play and instruction for both full and half-day programs will provide the opportunity to examine how teachers experience the relationship within the context of time and the demands and expectations of the curriculum.

**Research Question**

Over the past decade full day kindergarten offerings have significantly increased. Research has shown that along with the increase in academic expectations students who attend full day kindergarten display greater gains both academically and socially than their half day counterparts. However, an examination of the experiences of teachers who have taught both in full and half-day kindergarten programs in providing for play and its relationship to learning has not been studied. This problem has led to the following research question: How do teachers who have taught both full and half-day kindergarten programs experience play based teaching methods and instruction practices in the development of student academic and social skills?

**Theoretical Framework**

In order to examine the research question, the theoretical framework of the "Constructivism Learning Theory" will be used. Constructivism is a philosophy which examines students' logical and conceptual growth. The underlying concept within this theory is that individuals produce knowledge and form meaning based upon their experiences. The role of the teacher is very important within a constructivism learning theory. The teacher functions as a
facilitator whose role it is to aid the student when it comes to their own understanding. Teachers are continually in conversation with students, creating the learning experience that is open to new directions depending upon the needs of the student as the learning progresses. The constructivism learning theory allows children to develop the skills and confidence to analyze the world around them. The purpose of using this theory is to better understand how practitioners perceive the teaching methods and instructional practices that impact the learning experiences of their students.

Constructivism as a theory has its origins in the work of Jean Piaget who saw play as a major component in a child's learning. Jean Piaget was a philosopher from Switzerland who was famous for the work that he did studying cognitive development. Piaget's theory of constructivism impacts learning because teachers have to make an instructional plan which will enhance their students' logical and conceptual growth. Teachers must put emphasis on the significant role of play in learning experiences. Piaget's theory of constructivism contends that people produce knowledge and form meaning based upon their experiences. Contradictory to many early educational philosophers, Piaget saw play as an important and necessary part of a student's cognitive development. Piaget's theory covers learning theories, teaching methods, and education reform.

For Piaget, two of the key components which create the construction of an individual's new knowledge are accommodation and assimilation. Accommodation is reframing the world and new experiences into the mental capacity already present. Individuals consider a particular way in which the world operates. When things do not operate within that context, they must
accommodate and reframing the expectations with the outcomes. Accommodation can be better understood as a device for which failure leads to learning. Failure happens when we rely on the expectation that the world operates in only one way. We can only learn from these new experiences by accepting them and reframing our view of the way the world operates. At that point we can learn from experiences of failure. Assimilating causes an individual to incorporate new experiences into the old (already existing) experiences. This causes the individual to develop new outlooks, rethink what were once misunderstandings, and evaluate what is important, ultimately altering their perceptions.

Apart from learning theories, Piaget's theory of constructivism addresses how learning actually occurs, not focusing on what influences learning. The role of teachers is very important. Instead of giving a lecture the teachers in this theory function as facilitators whose role is to aid the student when it comes to their own understanding. This takes away focus from the teacher and lecture and puts it upon the student and their learning. The resources and lesson plans that must be initiated for this learning theory take a very different approach toward traditional learning as well. Instead of telling, the teacher must begin asking. Instead of answering questions that only align with their curriculum, the facilitator in this case must make it so that the student comes to the conclusions on their own instead of being told. Also, teachers are continually in conversation with the students, creating the learning experience that is open to new directions depending upon the needs of the student as the learning progresses. Teachers following Piaget's theory of constructivism must challenge the student by making them effective critical thinkers and not being merely a "teacher" but also a mentor, a consultant, and a coach.
Social constructivism not only acknowledges the uniqueness and complexity of the learner, but actually encourages, utilizes, and rewards it as an integral part of the learning process (Wertsch, 1997). Another crucial assumption regarding the nature of the learner concerns the level and source of motivation for learning. According to Von Glasersfeld (1989) sustaining motivation to learn is strongly dependent on the learner’s confidence in his or her potential for learning. These feelings of competence and belief in potential to solve new problems, are derived from first-hand experience of mastery of problems in the past and are much more powerful than any external acknowledgment and motivation (Prawat and Floden 1994). This links up with Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky 1978) where learners are challenged within close proximity to, yet slightly above, their current level of development. By experiencing the successful completion of challenging tasks, learners gain confidence and motivation to embark on more complex challenges.

According to the social constructivist approach, instructors have to adapt to the role of facilitators and not teachers (Bauersfeld, 1995). Whereas a teacher gives a lecture that covers the subject matter, a facilitator helps the learner to get to his or her own understanding of the content. The emphasis thus turns away from the instructor and the content, and towards the learner (Gamoran, Secada, & Marrett, 1998). This dramatic change of role implies that a facilitator needs to display a totally different set of skills than that of a teacher (Brownstein 2001). A teacher tells, a facilitator asks; a teacher lectures from the front, a facilitator supports from the back; a teacher gives answers according to a set curriculum, a facilitator provides guidelines and creates the environment for the learner to arrive at his or her own conclusions; a
teacher mostly gives a monologue, a facilitator is in continuous dialogue with the learners (Rhodes and Bellamy, 1999). The learning environment should also be designed to support and challenge the learner's thinking (Di Vesta, 1987).

Social constructivism, strongly influenced by Vygotsky's (1978) work, suggests that knowledge is first constructed in a social context and is then appropriated by individuals (Bruning et al., 1999; M. Cole, 1991; Eggan & Kauchak, 2004).

Lev Vygotsky’s educational philosophy on childhood experiences and the developmental appropriateness of learning stages is the theoretical framework that will be used to examine this study. Vygotsky acknowledged that it was an empirically established fact that what a child learns should be somehow matched to their developmental level. But, he believed that there were at least two developmental levels that needed to be considered. The first he called the actual developmental level. He defined this as "The level of development of a child’s mental functions that has been established as a result of certain already completed developmental cycles" (Vygotsky, 1978a, p.32). Vygotsky considered a child’s actual developmental level, those things that a child could do on his own, the "end products" of development. He believed they were skills that had already matured in the child, hence the ability to perform them without the assistance of others. Second, he believed that tasks a child could complete with the assistance of others was also indicative of a child’s mental development. Vygotsky believed, skills that were still maturing in the child were; "buds or flowers of development, rather than the fruits of development" (1997, p. 33). He called the difference between these two measures of mental intelligence the zone of proximal
development (Vygotsky, 1978a). Those skills that fell within the zone of proximal development could also be thought of as a measure of a child’s cognitive developmental level.

To Vygotsky, determining a child’s zone of proximal development was vital because it allowed one to predict what skills were maturing in the child at that time, thus allowing one a window into which skills would be developing next. Vygotsky’s theory contends that although learning is directly related to the course of child development, the two are never accomplished in equal measure or in parallel (p. 35). Therefore, the relations between learning and development cannot be encompassed by an unchanging hypothetical formulation (p. 35). In other words, every child learns and develops differently.

Lev Vygotsky believed that culture is the principle determinant of cognitive progress. In his theory on constructivism, knowledge leads to further cognitive development. He argued that knowledge is internalization of social activity.

The constructivist learning theory directly applies to an examination of teachers’ experience in half as well as an all-day kindergarten program in providing the use of play in the instructional experience. Every kindergarten classroom has many variations. The experiences that a teacher provides has a major impact. This theory provides the general framework for this study as it will frame the experiences in half–day and full-day kindergarten programs that lead to an opportunity to examine the essence of this experience for teachers as they serve to meet the needs of play and instruction.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This study will investigate how teachers who have taught in both full and half-day kindergarten experience play based methods and instructional practices in the development of academic and social skills. This study is significant because it will provide valuable information to support local, state, and national initiatives in providing quality kindergarten programming.

Referencing the theoretical framework of Constructivist Learning Theory, in particular the work of Lev Vgotsky, will allow the researcher to examine how teachers relate play based methods and practices to enhance the development academic and social skills.

The purpose of my literature review is to explore how overall learning and social development in kindergarten occur from the perspective of the teacher experience. To do so, it is necessary to examine the historical evolution of kindergarten and how the practice has changed over time. Subsequently, the modern practices of the role and work of kindergarten teachers that include full day and half day programs will be investigated. Modern practices will address the academic benefits by examining instructional comparisons and use of instructional time. The relationship between social and academic growth will also be explored. By tracing the historical development of kindergarten, the researcher will discover the rational for play based instructional methods and practices that will provide a framework for the current examination of social and academic skill development.
Kindergarten: A Changing Paradigm

Kindergartens first evolved from Froebel’s model focused on spiritual and moral development to a Progressive-era emphasis on child development and transition into formal schooling (Beatty, 1995). Frederich Froebel was the first to establish a new type of early childhood schooling, a child’s garden, or kindergarten. Kindergarten was designed as an educational environment where children cognitively develop through play and self-activity.

Conceptually, kindergarten has undergone a series of transformations since its inception in the mid 1800s. Kindergarten originated in 1837 and was a product of the work of theorist Frederick Froebel. Froebel envisioned kindergarten to be "a child's garden", a place for children between the ages of three and seven to "develop their mental, social, and emotional faculties through play, music, movement, interaction with the outdoors" (Shapiro, 1983). At its inception, was the belief that young children think and learn differently from older children, therefore kindergarten was introduced as a place where young children could develop all of the dimensions of self before entering the rigorous formal educational system (Chung and Walsh, 2000). Prior to Froebel's kindergarten, children under the age of 7 did not attend school. It was believed that young children (under the age of 7) did not have the ability to focus or develop cognitive and emotional skills. Froebel's approach to education was "self-activity" which was an idea that allowed the child to be led by his own interests and to freely explore them. The teacher's role was to be a guide and not a lecturer. In kindergartens, children are "gently led over the threshold of learning by the seductive charm of music, flowers, games, pictures, and curious objects," reported kindergarten pioneer Elizabeth Peabody in 1863 (deCos, 2001).
Peabody’s guide for teachers stressed the elements of kindergartens that distinguished them from traditional schools: the role of play, flexible physical environments, outside activities and the exclusion of traditional academic subjects (Ross, 1976).

Froebel recognized three forms of learning. 1. Knowledge of forms of life, including gardening, caring for animals, and domestic tasks. 2. Knowledge of forms of mathematics, such as knowledge of geometric forms and their relationships, and 3. Knowledge of forms of beauty, including design, color, shape, harmonies, and movement. Froebel’s kindergarten was designed to meet each child’s need for physical activity, the development of sensory awareness and physical dexterity, creative expression, exploration of ideas and concepts, the pleasure of signing, the experiences of living among others, and satisfaction of the soul. Friedrich Froebel changed the way we think about early childhood education. He provided special materials (known as gifts) to tiles, sticks and rings to demonstrate that children learn by playing (Feeny, Moravcik, Nolte, Christensen, 2010). The first kindergartens of Froebel inspired the thinking of many early childhood theorists including Lev Vygotsky (Elkind, 2011).

A century later, we see kindergartens firmly institutionalized in public elementary schools and described in media reports as the new first grade (Tyre, 2006) and a thicket of academic challenges (Zernike, 2000), with playtime in kindergarten giving way to worksheets, math drills and fill-in-the-bubble standardized tests (Hemphill, 2006). Once a distinctive educational model focused on the child’s social, emotional, and moral development, media images increasingly cast kindergarten’s purpose as the beginning of serious academic
instruction. The original philosophy behind the purpose of kindergarten can barely be seen in the kindergartens of today.

Elkind (2011) examined kindergarten activities to find that kindergarten students are assigned homework worksheets to support classroom learning of numbers and letters. In a developmentally appropriate classroom, children are busy taking care of plants and animals, experimenting with sand and water, drawing and painting, listening to songs and stories, and engaging in dramatic play. He found that current practices in kindergarten classrooms come from a variety pressures that include parents who are anxious to give their children an edge in what they regard as an increasingly competitive global economy; giving disadvantaged young children academic training to provide them with the skills and motivation to continue their education and break cycles of poverty; the push from politicians for accountability, standards, and testing in order to win votes as much as or more than to improve the schools. The conception of the competent infant and young child was dictated by the social and political forces rather than by any new data or findings (Elkind, 1986).

Elkind also addressed the deployment of unsupported, potentially harmful pedagogies is particularly pernicious at the early childhood level. It is during the early years, ages four to seven, when children's basic attitudes toward themselves as students and toward learning and school are developed (Elkind, 2011). Children who come through this period feeling good about themselves, who enjoy learning and who like school, will having a lasting appetite for the acquisition of skills and knowledge. If we want to do what is best for children, we will give
them and their parents the developmentally appropriate, high-quality, affordable, and accessible early-childhood education they both need and deserve (Elkind, 2011).

In summary kindergarten has evolved from the 1800s to today’s classrooms. The need to develop the mental and social faculties of young children ages 3-7 hasn’t changed but the education system has certainly changed its viewpoint on the instruction that is needed in order for students to be successful. From building houses out of blocks to being expected to know how to read, kindergarten has transformed in the last century. Kindergarten today is a world away from the play-centered programs many adults remember and a more academically rigorous place (Hardy, 2009). The change in practice has evolved over time from a variety of pressures (high stakes testing, standards based instruction, Common Core, MCAS, & PARCC) at the local, state, and global levels. By researching the changes that have occurred in kindergarten over the past one hundred years it will provide the researcher with a better understanding of teaching practices that have been employed over time. This will be used to examine today’s teachers’ perceptions on the differences in method and instructional practices in their full and half day kindergarten classrooms.

The Academic Benefits of a Full-Day Kindergarten Program

Although there were mixed results on the effects of full-day kindergarten on academic achievement in studies conducted in the 1970s and 1980s research reported in the 1990s shows consistent positive academic outcomes for all children enrolled in full-day kindergarten programs.
Cryan et al. (1992) conducted a two-phase study that examined the effects of half-day and full-day kindergarten programs on children’s academic and behavioral success in school. In the first phase of the study, data were collected on 8,290 children from 27 school districts; the second phase included nearly 6,000 children. The researchers found that participation in full-day kindergarten was related positively to subsequent school performance. Children who attended full-day kindergarten scored higher on standardized tests, had fewer grade retentions, and had fewer Title I placements.

Hough and Bryde (1996) looked at student achievement data for 511 children enrolled in half-day and full-day kindergarten programs in 25 classrooms. Children in the full-day programs scored higher on the achievement test than those in half-day programs on every tested item. In a study of the effectiveness of full-day kindergarten for the Newark, New Jersey, Board of Education, Koopmans (1991) looked at two cohorts of students: one in its third year of elementary school and the other in its second year. There were no significant differences in reading comprehension and math scores on the California Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) for the first cohort; however, both reading comprehension and math scores were higher for students in the second cohort who had attended full-day kindergarten. Elicker and Mathur (1997) also found slightly greater academic progress in kindergarten and higher levels of first grade readiness for children in full-day kindergarten. Teachers reported significantly greater progress for full-day kindergarten children in literacy, math, and general learning skills.

A 2-year study of a pilot full-day kindergarten program in a middle class suburb of Wisconsin was conducted by Elicker and Mathur (1997). The researchers attempted to address
many of the design flaws of previous kindergarten studies when designing their study. Full-day enrollment lists were obtained by random drawing from a pool of all incoming kindergarten students and children were randomly selected and assigned to the full-day program. Teachers were matched for professional training, experience, and teaching philosophy; however, they were not randomly assigned to program types. Elicker and Mathur compared the full-day program to the traditional half-day program. Both programs offered an activity based, child centered program that followed the guidelines for developmental appropriate practices recommended by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Four full-day and eight half-days were observed over a two year period. Family demographics and background information were obtained through parental survey prior to the start of the study to determine similarities between cohorts.

Kindergarten report cards were analyzed to determine differences in achievement between full-day as compared to half-day kindergarten and kindergarten teachers were asked to rate each child’s readiness for first grade (Elicker & Mathur, 1997). Academic outcomes at the end of the kindergarten year indicated slightly greater progress in kindergarten and higher levels of first grade readiness among children in the full-day program (Elicker & Mathur, 1997).

The use of report cards to determine differences in academic achievement is a weakness in this research design in that grades on a kindergarten report card are subjective. The marks are generally not reflective of test grades; rather they are a teacher’s judgment regarding how a student is doing. The accuracy of teachers’ perceptions regarding first grade readiness has been validated by Gullo (2000); therefore, the results in this area have more validity.
In 1997 Fusaro examined 23 studies published between 1974 and 1991 to determine any significant overall effects favoring full-day programs. Twenty-one studies used achievement test results and 2 studies used teacher ratings. Results of the study determined that children who attended full-day kindergarten achieved at a higher level than children who attended a half-day program (Fusaro, 1997).

Numerous research studies show that students who attend full-day programs do make greater gains during the kindergarten year than students attending half-day programs (Brewster & Railsback, 2002; Clark, 2001; da Costa & Bell, 2001; Watson & West, 2004). However, some researchers suggest that any gains in academic achievement may only have short-term effect (Brewster & Railsback, 2002; Walston, West, & Rathburn, 2005). Other research indicated that kindergarten children attending full-day programs perform statistically higher on nationally standardized achievement tests at the completion of kindergarten than students enrolled in half-day programs (Brewster & Railsback, 2002). In a study of 974 second graders from a large Midwestern school district, students enrolled in full-day programs not only scored significantly higher on standardized reading and math achievement tests than children in half-day kindergarten, but were also more independent in their learning, were more creative thinkers, and had a more positive approach to the teacher (Gullo, 2000).

Although most research shows greater academic gains during the kindergarten year for students attending full-day programs, there has been a lack of evidence on the long-term benefits of full-day versus half-day kindergarten (Gullo, 2000). In the Evansville-Vanderburgh (Indiana) study, the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) was administered when former
kindergarten students reached the third grade. The results showed that the students who had attended full-day kindergarten scored significantly higher than the half-day kindergarten students in 10 of the 14 tested areas. When the CTBS was administered to the same students in fifth and seventh grades, the full-day students scored higher in all 14 areas. However, on the contrary, in the Munice Community Schools (Indiana) study comparing full-day and half-day programs, the data indicated that there was an initial jump in scores between kindergarten and first grade for full-day students but the difference in Terra Nova and ISTEP+ test scores between full-day and half-day students tended to decline (Plucker, Eaton, Rapp, Lim, Nowak, & Hansen, 2004).

Based on data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998-1999, Walston, West, and Rathburn (2005) concluded that research did not detect any substantive differences in children’s third-grade achievement relative to the type of kindergarten program (full-day or half-day) they attended.

Many variables exist that can have a greater impact on a student’s academic success than simply attending a full-day program. Over the course of time such factors as family income level, parent education, student study habits, school programs, and types of curriculum often outweigh the type of kindergarten attended (Brewster & Railsback, 2002). In addition, the reading and knowledge skills a student possesses when entering kindergarten is also a predictor of academic success.

In summary the research comparing half-day kindergarten versus full-day kindergarten show that students benefit academically from a full-day program. The literature supports higher achievement scores in kindergarten and first grade readiness from students who have attended a
full-day program. Students in full-day kindergarten programs performed better in both math and literacy. In addition to higher scores on standardized assessments, students who attended a full-day kindergarten program were less likely to be retained and/or eligible for Title I or special education services. Students in full-day kindergarten programs displayed higher levels of independence and creativity. Although the research supports the higher academic achievement levels of students that attend full-day rather than a half-day kindergarten programs, the developmental appropriateness of the program is integral in the success of the student. In addition to additional research to determine the longitudinal effects of academic performance, there is also a need to examine the perception of teachers as to what makes a full-day kindergarten program effective in improving teaching and learning in literacy and social skill development. In order to delve into the method and instructional practices further, it is necessary to examine instructional comparisons.

**Instructional Comparisons.** Half-day kindergarten typically refers to kindergarten classes offered 5 days per week for 2.5 hours each day. The term full-day kindergarten typically refers to kindergarten classes offered 5 days per week for 5 hours of instruction per day. Although the academic and social curricula for kindergarten has been determined through state and national curriculum frameworks, there is a significant difference between how instruction is delivered in a full-day program versus a half-day program. And this difference has a serious impact on the students in those programs.

Nationally representative survey data and an early childhood longitudinal study show that full-day kindergarten programs are more likely than half-day programs to offer more than 60
minutes of reading instruction and more than 30 minutes of math instruction daily, and to include
reading aloud everyday (Watson and West, 2004). This translates to full-day kindergarten
students receiving 30 percent more instructional time in reading and 46 percent more
instructional time in math as students in half-day kindergarten. In a study conducted by Elicker
and Mathur in 1997, the structure of both programs was investigated. Over a two-year period, 4-5
days of classroom observations were conducted both in the morning and afternoon and at
various times during the school year using the Early Childhood Classroom Observation System
(ECCOS). Documentation accounted for student participation in teacher directed activities and
child-initiated learning activities and the level of engagement in the activities. Participating
children were observed for one-minute intervals, on a random rotating schedule. The researchers
used this data to construct a profile of typical child activity throughout the kindergarten day for
each classroom, using data generated by all children (p. 466). Elicker & Mathur found that
teacher-directed, large group active and large group listening activities consumed the greatest
amount of time in both types of classrooms. They also found that teacher directed small group
activities comprised a small amount of typical kindergarten day and that the child initiated
activities accounted for more time in the full-day kindergarten classrooms. A comparison of
classroom activities in year 1 and year 2 of the study indicated stronger differences between full-
day and half-day programs during the second year. Systematic observations of the classroom
activities revealed that the full-day program included more child-initiated learning activity, more
teacher-directed individual activity, higher levels of active engagement, and higher levels of
positive affect. In addition to the academic gains reported in a full day kindergarten program
parents and educators report that full day kindergarten is less rushed, creates more opportunities
for extending learning opportunities, adds flexibility to address individual students' needs, and enables better communication between home and school (Elicker and Mathur, 1997).

Full day kindergarten programs promote more social growth than a half day program. Children in full day kindergarten programs show more positive behavior than their peers in half-day kindergarten programs in the areas of originality, independent learning, involvement in classroom activities, productivity with their peers, and their approach to the teacher (J.R.Cyran, 1992). Full-day kindergarten allows a more consistent schedule for children, eliminates adjusting to two daytime schedules, reduces transition time, and reduces stress for children (Elicker and Mathur, 1997).

The distinct differences in full day versus half day kindergarten focus on the amount of time. Full-day programs usually offer twice as much instructional time on average as do half-day programs but children will only benefit from the longer programs if that extra instructional time is devoted to activities that promote learning and development. Full-day kindergarten schedules run for four and one-half to six hours per day, five days per week. Full-day kindergarten follows the same school calendar as the early primary school grades. In contrast, half-day kindergarten programs usually meet for two or three hours per day, five days a week. This means that children enrolled in full-day kindergarten programs are in school approximately 32 hours per week, whereas half-day students are in school only 16 hours per week (Lee et al, 2004). Although it is obvious that there is more time in a full day session it is also how the time is used that plays an important role. Additional research shows children's literacy learning is enhanced in full-day programs, as the full-day schedule provides a more intensive, ongoing,
enriched language and literacy experience for the young child. (Morrow, L. M., Strickland, D. S., & Woo, D. G., 1999). Gamoran and Milesi (2003) found that children who are enrolled in full-day programs get an average of twice as much instructional time as do half-day programs. However, this extra instructional time will only be beneficial to students if teachers engaged in activities that promote learning and development (Lee et al, 2004).

Students in full day simultaneously develop their originality, productivity, and independence while initiating their learning experiences and spending more time engaged in small teacher and peer instructional groups. In a study conducted by Alber-Kelsay (1998), the results indicated that most teachers perceived full-day kindergarten superior to half-day kindergarten. Teachers felt that full-day kindergarten programs provided students more time to develop basic listening and language skills. Moreover, in a full-day kindergarten classroom, teachers believed that students were not bored, experienced a more in-depth skill building program, and students were creating better social bonds with their peers.

Full-day and half-day kindergarten refer to the amount of time students spend in school. It’s obvious that full-day students are spending more time (approximately 50% more) in school than half-day students. The research shows that the extra time is spent on increased reading and math instruction. Instruction is delivered in small group and 1:1 settings more often in full day programs as compared to half day programs which tend to focus on large group instruction. Longer periods of instruction in a full day setting also contribute to greater opportunities for students to work together with their peers or independently. These two modes of learning also help to foster social interactions and independence. More research is needed to gather data on
the instruction in full-day kindergarten versus half-day kindergarten in order to determine the most effective strategies that lead to student success both socially and academically. In order to further examine the issue of time, it is necessary to examine how the additional time provided by full-day kindergarten is utilized.

**Usage of Instructional Time.** How time is spent in full-day kindergarten programs is different both quantitatively and qualitatively from how time is spent in half-day kindergarten (Cryan, Sheehan, Wiechel, & Bandy-Hedden, 1992). The difference between how instructional time is used in a half-day program as compared to how instructional time is used in a full-day program is a critical factor in the success of the students who attend both programs.

While kindergarten curricula are similar across classrooms, instructional practices vary in significant and important ways (Hough and Bryde, 1996). Among all kindergarten classrooms students may have identical textbooks, workbooks, and learning standards. That alone isn’t enough to ensure that all students are receiving the instruction they need in order to effectively master skills. It’s the instructional practices and use of time that the teacher employs that will qualify the effectiveness of the lesson. Many studies on the benefits of attending full-day kindergarten versus half-day kindergarten have focused on academic gains but these studies have overlooked the issue of how the additional time is utilized within the classroom setting, as well as changes in instructional methodologies and/or classroom structures that result in the increased time. Accumulating evidence indicates that variations in how teachers use instructional time (whole group, small group, one on one, and independently) and actual time on task impact student learning (Hardy, Lawler-Prince, & Slate, 1993).
Researchers have found that full-day programs provide opportunities for students to be more actively engaged (Elicker & Mathur, 1997) and enable teachers to extend learning experiences, develop more positive and nurturing relationships with students, and maintain better communication with parents (Elicker & Mathur, 1997; Hough & Bryde, 1996). The focus of the classroom is on the development of the whole child, not just academic readiness. Advocates of full-day kindergarten state that full-day programs allow children and teachers time to explore topics in depth, reduce the amount of transition time, provide for greater continuity of day to day activities, and provide an environment that favors a child-centered, developmentally appropriate approach (Rothenberg, 1995).

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has issued a set of guidelines referred to as developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) regarding children’s learning and development. These guidelines state that since children learn through active exploration and interaction with adults, peers, and materials, activities should provide concrete examples and be relevant to the child’s world (Bredekamp & Copple, 2002). Many states are now developing guidelines for children ages six and younger based on the National Association for Education of Young Children’s (NAEYC) list of developmentally appropriate practices. Because children entering kindergarten vary widely in maturity, teachers need to provide several levels of learning experience for each activity. Every child has an individual style of learning and timing of personal growth and development; therefore, a curriculum must be designed to accommodate individual differences among children (Bredekamp & Copple, 2002). The
following list is adapted from the NAEYC list of the "Top 10 Signs of a Good Kindergarten Classroom":

1. Children are active, playing and working with other children and materials.

2. Children have access to variety of activities and materials

3. Children receive individual and small-group work time with teachers, not solely large-group work time with teachers.

4. Children’s work decorates the classroom.

5. Children learn numbers and the alphabet during every day experiences, not solely large-group work time with teachers.

6. Children have long periods (at least an hour) of playing and exploring, including playing outside daily, and do not fill out worksheets.

7. Children are read to by teachers during the day and in small groups, not just during group story time.

8. Children receive curriculum individualized to meet their own needs and strengths.

9. Children and parents look forward to school.

The additional time that a full-day program offers allows teachers to spend more time engaged in developmentally appropriate practices such as those listed above.

In summary full-day kindergarten unequivocally allows for more instructional time than a half-day kindergarten program. How that time is used is what determines the effectiveness of a
student’s academic and social development. Students learning is impacted by a teacher’s use of instructional time. Instructional practices from one teacher to another can vary greatly regardless of the fact that they are spending the same amount of time on a skill. The guidelines put out by the National Association for Education of Young Children identifies developmentally appropriate practices regarding young children’s learning and development. Every child has a different learning style and instructional practices need to accommodate those differences. More research in the area of teacher perspectives will identify how time is best used to support all students in their social and academic development.

The Social Benefits of a Full-day Kindergarten Program

Children who attend full-day kindergarten programs benefit socially more than their counterparts in half-day programs. A study done by Clark and Kirk in 2000 found that children who experienced the full-day were less intellectually dependent, experienced less anxiety, were less withdrawn, and were more likely to approach the teacher. Additional studies showed that children in full-day kindergartens were more engaged with their peers, and made significantly greater progress in social skills when participating in full-day kindergarten programs.

Elicker (1997) concluded that full-day programs appear to decrease stress on students as compared to half-day programs, where there is more pressure on teachers to get through the curriculum. In review of research conducted by the New Jersey Department of Education, less anger, shyness, and blaming behaviors were identified among children attending full-day programs. Children in the full-day kindergarten programs more often displayed positive emotion in their activities (Elicker & Mathur, 1997). Children in full-day programs were less dependent
on their teachers for approval and had higher expectations for success on academic tasks than children in half-day programs (Rothenberg, 1995).

In the review of National and Indiana data Plucker et al (2004) found that students who participated in full-day kindergarten classes had better work habits. More than half of the teachers in the study felt that students who were in full-day kindergarten were more independent than students in half-day classes. A full-day program allows for a variety of social opportunities across multiple settings (classroom, bus, playground, lunchroom, special area classes, etc.). Hough and Byrde (1996) found that students in full-day kindergarten programs attended 40 more hours of classes than their half-day counterparts. According to Carter, Creswell, and deAlba (2004) attendance is a critical factor in a child’s ability to improve social and behavioral skills.

Research also shows long-term adaptive social and behavioral outcomes for students who attended full-day kindergarten. Cryan et al. (1992) conducted a longitudinal study to investigate the effects of kindergarten schedules (half-day, alternate day, and full-day) on elementary children’s success: achievement, incidence of grade retention, provisions of special education services, and classroom behaviors. The results indicated that teachers rated children in full-day classrooms higher on dimensions of classroom adaptive behaviors than children in half-day classes. That is, children enrolled in full-day kindergarten classes were perceived as more original, more independent in learning, more involved in classroom activities, more productive with peers, less intellectually dependent, less prone to failure anxiety, less unreflective, less withdrawn, less blaming, and more willing to approach the teacher than were children enrolled in
half-day classes. Cryan et al. (1992) also found the full-day programs produce the development of pro-social characteristics in students.

Elicker and Mathur (1997) also conducted a two-year longitudinal experiment of four full-day and eight half-day kindergarten classrooms in Wisconsin. They found that children in full-day classes initiated more learning activities and received more one to one instruction from the teacher, while spending less time in teacher-directed groups. They also found a greater degree of active engagement among students who had attended full-day kindergarten. In addition, Plucker et al. (2004) found that although students in full-day received the same percentage number of satisfactory marks as half-day students; full-day students received less unsatisfactory percentage marks as the half-day students. Students who were enrolled in full-day kindergarten had higher satisfactory marks and lower unsatisfactory marks in second grade as compared to those who were in half-day kindergarten programs. By third grade students who had attended full-day also received satisfactory marks more often than the half-day students.

There have also been studies to disprove the evidence that students who attend full-day kindergarten have better social skill development than those students who have attended half-day kindergarten programs. Using data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS-K), Finn and Pannozzo (2004) compared student behavior in full-day as compared to half-day kindergarten. Teachers rated half-day classes as better behaved than full-day classes. Afternoon (half-day) classes were rated better than morning (half-day) classes (Finn & Pannozzo, 2004). The researchers pointed out the common aspect of these findings. Morning classes, in full-day and morning only kindergartens, were rated as poorest. The time of day undoubtedly affects
students’ behavior as young children might be expected to be more active in the morning and to exhibit more misbehavior (Finn & Pannozzo, 2004). Additionally, teachers’ ratings of classes that start in the morning and continue to the afternoon may be negatively impacted by teacher fatigue (Finn & Pannozzo, 2004).

Other studies have found no difference in social skills and behavior with full-day kindergarten as compared to half-day kindergarten programs (Stofflet, 1998). Some even found a decrease in positive behaviors, with the suggestion that this may be due to the effect of increased academic expectations on full-day kindergarten children (Hildebrand, 2000). Hough and Bryde (1996) compared teacher ratings of over 500 kindergarteners and found little difference between full-day and half-day attendees in terms of focus on tasks, cooperative work and play, or showing respect for rules. Similar results were reported by West, Denton, and Reaney (2001), who used ECLS-K data to examine skills such as accepting peer ideas, making friends, and comforting others. These inconsistent findings have led to a need for additional research.

Much of the literature shows that students in a full-day kindergarten program display higher levels of social development. Full-day kindergarten students have better teacher and peer relations. A full-day program allows for more opportunities across settings for students to foster social interactions with a variety of adults which enables students to practice social skills more regularly. Studies show that students in full-day kindergarten programs are less withdrawn, display less anxiety, and exhibit less frustration. A Teacher’s prospective will add to the
research by providing first-hand information on how a full-day kindergarten program enhances social skills.

**Summary**

The purpose of kindergarten was for young children (between the ages of 4-6) to develop the dimensions of one’s self before being capable of taking on the demands of academic schooling. Froebel’s theories on early childhood education inspired the work of many theorists to come.

Lev Vygotsky expanded Froebel’s theories by looking at the role of the teacher and how the adult impacts a child’s Zone of Proximal Development, the difference between what a child can do independently and what they can do with adult assistance. When Vygotsky’s theory is applied to the classroom, two things become clear. First, it is imperative that the classroom teacher has an in-depth understanding of each child she teaches, in particular, his actual developmental level, and his zone of proximal development. Second, that teachers utilize strategies that allow each individual child to work within his zone of proximal development in order to best support the functions within the child that are maturing at the time.

In comparing full-day kindergarten to half-day kindergarten there has been much research to support the academic benefits of a full day program. In addition to having over 50% more academic time (in the areas of literacy and math), there is evidence of higher performances on standardized tests, fewer grade retentions, and fewer Title I placements. A full day kindergarten program also allows for more variety in instruction. Teachers reported feeling less
rushed in their teaching and could extend learning opportunities, address individual needs, and promote more child-initiated learning activities.

The National Association for Education of Young Children’s (NAEYC) list of developmentally appropriate practices suggests that programs allow time for small group and one-on-one strategies that support Vygotsky’s Social Development Theory. Without the inclusion of these social strategies, children in a half-day program do not learn and develop at the same rate as their counterparts in a full-day kindergarten program.

A child’s social and academic development contribute to their overall success. Opportunities to learn in a variety of social settings deepen one’s level of understanding. In a full-day kindergarten program students have more time to work either with peers or independently in comparison to their half-day counterparts who traditionally learn in large and small group settings. Working with partners and/or independently fosters independent learning, originality, social interactions between peers, and involvement. When provided with these opportunities students generally have a more positive approach towards their teacher, their learning, and their overall behavior. Full-day kindergarten also provides more social opportunities across settings (specials, lunch, and recess) and a more consistent schedule.

The research that supports full-day kindergarten versus half-day kindergarten focuses on the academic and social benefits for students to acquire the necessary skills. Time is an important/obvious factor that contributes to students having the ability to learn and master the needed academic and social skills in kindergarten. However, there is a gap in the knowledge as to how teachers experience and instruct in full and half-day programs that could also be an
important factor. Acquiring the perceptions of teachers who have taught in both settings will provide knowledge of effective instructional strategies that can be applied in either setting in order for students to acquire needed academic and social skills.
Chapter 3: Research Design

Methodology

The problem of practice that this study is embedded in the inequity represented by limited opportunity to access full-day kindergarten programs. Research supports that a full-day kindergarten experience leads to greater academic achievement as well as social skill development. In order to investigate the instructional practices of full and half-day kindergarten programming, the following research question is proposed: How do teachers who have taught in both full and half-day kindergarten experience play based teaching methods and instructional practices in the development of student academic and social skills. By identifying the play based teaching methods and instructional practices that teachers experience in both the full and half-day kindergarten programs, the researcher will provide a better understanding of vital methods and practices can be developed and utilized to strengthen a half-day program.

To answer the research question a qualitative approach is necessary. The use of a qualitative research design for this study is supported by Creswell (2012) and Patton (2002). In qualitative research, the purpose statement and the research questions are stated so that you can best learn from the participants (p. 17). In this study research questions will be posed in such a way that the experiences of the participants, practitioners who have taught in both half- and full-day kindergarten settings, will provide the opportunity to identify play based teaching methods and instructional practices in the development of student academic and social skills.

Although the review of the literature did provide information related to the benefits, both academic and social, of a full-day kindergarten program, there was little information related to
the experiences of teachers who have taught in both full and half-day programs that examine these methods and practices. This information may be best uncovered through structured discussions with kindergarten practitioners who have lived experiences in both settings.

**Research Design**

The proposed study will utilize a qualitative intrinsic case study methodology to interpret the perceptions of teachers who have experienced both a full and half-day kindergarten program to examine activities that favorably impact the development of literacy and social skills. The study is well suited to this design for several reasons as supported by Stake (1995). Stake uses the term intrinsic and suggests that researchers who have a genuine interest in the case should use this approach when the intent is to better understand the case. As an elementary school principal, the researcher has a genuine interest to better understand the practices that lead to greater social skill development and achievement in kindergartners. Therefore, the lived experience of a number of kindergarten practitioners who have taught in both half- and full day programs will be explored. Discussions with those teachers will be focused on their perceptions of what they have experienced as teachers in those programs; the meaning that they make from those experiences.

**Research Tradition**

The research tradition is embedded in Intrinsic Case Study. This is a social science discipline. The use of case studies for the creation of new theory in social sciences was developed by the sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss who presented their research method, Grounded theory, in 1967. Researchers may interview a group to learn more about the
group. The research moves between data collection and data analysis in order to gain a theoretical sampling which will in turn assist the researcher in gathering data to answer their research question.

Case study methodology assumes the existence of multiple realities that are interpreted differently by each individual who is living the experience. These different realities exist because each individual brings their own voice which is derived from the different social and contextual experiences that they have been exposed to in the past. In an intrinsic case study the researcher’s goal is to construct a new reality by co-constructing the shared realities of each of the participants in the study. As Schwartz-Yanow and Shea (2012) state: “language is at the nexus of meaning, context and action in interpretive research.” In this intrinsic case study one-on-one interviews will be used with study participants in order to better understand a phenomenon through their perceptions of the experiences they have had. Through discussion (the use of language and dialog), data will be collected and analyzed for the purpose of better understanding our human situation.

Two of the key theorists of this approach are Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) and Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934). Bakhtin (1981) claimed that true understanding is dialogic in nature. Through conversation and collaboration with others, knowledge is constructed (Styslinger, 2002, p. 261). He saw the humanities as being a science very different from the mathematical and natural sciences and believed that in the social sciences true understanding comes through the process of establishing, transmitting, and interpreting the words of others (Bahktin, 1981, p. 351). Vygotsky agreed. It is discourse - the situated, purposeful use of the
phonological/graphological and meaning potential of language - that needs to be focused on if we wish to understand how knowledge can be created and appropriated in and through participation in joint activity (Wells, 1994). From the start, Vygotsky's intention was to create a theory that would not only help us to better understand what it is to be human, but also help us to act effectively to improve our human situation (Wells, 1994).

Site and Participants

Only one site has been chosen for this study. The selection of one site will allow for the research questions to be answered based on the specific context in which these program reside. It has been acknowledged that the use of one site may be considered a weakness in qualitative research, but an interpretive design is particularly conducive to such a study. According to Schwartz-Yanow and Shea (2012), context plays an extremely important role in interpretive research. Schwartz-Shea and Yanow go one to state:

The centrality of context to interpretive methods lends weight to treating contextuality as a more appropriate indicator of the achievements of interpretive research than generalizability, its equivalent in positivist methodology; it is a better fit with interpretive methodological orientations to knowledge creation and use. (p. 48)

For this reason, the use of one site should not be considered a weakness of this study.

The sampling strategy used will be purposeful sampling. In qualitative research we identify our participants and sites on purposeful sampling, based on places and people that can
best help us understand our central phenomenon (Creswell, 2012, p. 205). Purposeful sampling applies to both participants and sites. The standard used in choosing participants and sites is that they are information rich (Patton, 1990).

Participants in this study will be limited to practitioners (regular education and special education) who have taught in both half- and full-day kindergarten classrooms. All participants will need to have had at least one year of teaching experience in each of these kindergarten settings.

Between four and six participants will be chosen. This number will allow for gathering data in a timely manner and provide an in-depth perspective of the problem. It is typical in qualitative research to study a few individuals or a few cases. This is because the overall ability of the researcher to provide an in-depth picture diminishes with the addition of each new individual or site (Creswell, 2012, p. 209).

**Data Collection**

In this intrinsic case study, the researcher will conduct one face-to-face interview with each of the four to six participants. Interviews will be conducted with each person individually. The purpose of these interviews is to allow the primary researcher to enter into the minds and experiences of a group of practitioners who have experience teaching in both full-day and half-day settings. Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspectives of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit. We interview to find out what is in and on someone’s mind, to gather their stories (Patton, 2002, p. 340). Interviews will last
approximately one hour. They will be recorded and transcribed. Follow up interviews may be conducted if additional information is required for further clarification.

An interview guide will be used to ask open ended questions in these interviews. This guide will have a number of prepared open-ended questions designed to facilitate the obtaining of rich, vital, substantive descriptions of the co-researcher’s experience of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). These questions will be used to guide, but will be prepared to either alter, or not use these questions at all if need be as the participants share their stories (Moustakis, 1994). Since interview questions will be focused on the topics of instructional strategies and practices, the Massachusetts Educator Evaluation System in those two areas will be used as a guide (Appendix 1).

Follow up secondary questions will be used. These secondary questions will help the participants to unlock their tacit knowledge by prompting them to describe specific situations that have occurred in their classrooms and/or provide specific examples in order to deepen and make more vivid their initial responses.

Data Analysis

Analysis of qualitative data needs to follow a sequential manner. Smith and Osborn (2003) noted that a meticulous case-by-case analysis of individual transcripts can be a lengthy process. An analysis of the data must include the following characteristics: (a) movement from what is unique to a participant to what is shared among the participants, (b) description of the experience which moves to an interpretation of the experience, (c) commitment to understanding
the participant’s point of view, and (d) psychological focus on personal meaning-making within a particular context (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Smith, Flowers, & Larkin (2009) developed the following step by step guide to support a case study data analysis. The guide provides a practical focus on processes and strategies (including transparency and engagement with credibility issues) for analyzing data, and for organizing and developing that analysis (Smith, Flower, & Larkin, 2009). The processes outlined below are designed to encourage a reflective engagement with the participant’s account.

**Step 1 (1 to 2 days): Reading and re-reading.** According to Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009), the first step of data analysis in an interpretive study involves immersing oneself in the data. During this step the researcher will read the transcripts of each of the interviews several times. The researcher will also listen to the audio-tapes of the interviews while reading the transcripts. In doing this, it will put the participants at the forefront, imagining their voices while listening and reading. This process will allow the researcher to become more actively engaged with the data.

**Step 2: Initial note taking.** After the first reading of the transcripts in step one, as the researcher re-reads and listens to the audio-tapes notes will be taken to highlight important information throughout the transcripts. In their book, Smith, Flowers and Larkin identify three different types of note taking. The researcher will engage in all three:

- **Descriptive** notes describe the subject of the conversation within the transcript.
- **Linguistic** notes focus on the language that is being used
- **Conceptual** notes focus on the more specific concepts that are discussed.
The note-taking process will start with the researcher focusing on the transcripts of one participant at a time. During this process the researcher will highlight important quotes, descriptions and specific examples provided by each participant that will be used to identify major themes that come to light across the participants. These quotes, descriptions and specific examples will be used later in the data analysis process to create a profile of each of the participants. These profiles will be included in chapter four of this thesis in the form of an organizational chart.

**Step 3: Identifying themes.** In this step the researcher will begin to organize the notes into themes. These statements or short phrases begin to pull the data collected into chunks of information that relate to each other. Similar examples and descriptions given by participants will be pulled together. Quotes that make similar statements will be chunked together. It is in this step that the researcher will recognize similarities among the data collected across the interviewees. These similarities will guide the researcher in the identification of major themes among the data which in turn will identify experiences that have differed in method and practice between instructing in an all-day half-day kindergarten setting.

**Validity, Reliability, and Generalizability**

Several steps have been taken to assure the validity and reliability of this study. Moustakis (1994) defines validity as ŕestablishing the truth of thingsô (p. 57). In order to make this study valid, the teachers chosen will have all had at least one year of experience teaching in both full-day and half-day kindergarten classrooms. The validity of this study will also be enhanced by the fact that the researcher is a licensed PreK-grade 6 teacher, was the assistant
principal and principal at the study site. This gives the researcher an extensive background of
the content and context that is being studied strengthening her responsiveness to the data that is
being collected. Stronger responsiveness of the researcher leads to better congruence between
the questions being asked, the methodology being used, and the data being collected and
analyzed. This congruence leads to a higher level of verification which in turn increases the
rigor of the study increasing its validity (Morse et al., 2002).

As the Assistant Superintendent of the school district where this study will be done, the
researcher will need to take into account her influence on the participants. While it is assumed
that the participants will give honest and accurate responses, the bias of the respondents could
impact the data. The interviewee may feel they need to tell the researcher what they want to
hear. The researcher’s role places her in a place of power over the participants in this study, but,
this threat will be minimized for two reasons. First, the researcher has been working with these
teachers for a number of years in a professional learning community where they have used data
from a number of sources to identify ways in which they can strengthen the school’s
kindergarten programs. All of these teachers are aware of the fact that their students make better
academic and social gains in the full-day setting, and all are committed to better understanding
their planning and instructional strategies. Therefore, the teachers in this study have a personal
interest in the problem of practice and are invested in finding answers to the study questions.
This leads to the second reason that this threat to the validity of the study is minimized.

Working in a professional learning community, discussions among the staff about their
teaching practices occur often. Administration and teachers meet on a regular basis to look at
student data and to discuss strategies for improving student performance. For this reason, it has been purposely chosen to interview the participants in this study instead of using classroom observations as the source of data collection. The study participants are familiar with having dialog about what is going on in their classrooms. It is anticipated that they will be comfortable with the interview format.

Historically, classroom observations have been part of the educator evaluation process. Because of this, using classroom observations to collect data for this study could be seen as evaluative and threaten the validity of this study. The data collection needs to remain valid by not trying to control the collection to reveal what is desired. Strategies such as audio-taping the interviews and having the interviewees review the transcribed interview will help to maintain the validity in the data. By asking open ended questions it will allow the respondent to control the shared information as oppose to the interviewer asking the respondent to confirm or deny the interviewer's perspective.

Conducting focus groups with the interviewees prior to the interviews will provide them with the understanding of the instructional domains that were used to create the interview questions. They will also be provided with a copy of the interview questions ahead of time so that they can give thought to their responses prior to the interview. The study is limited to this one school setting and will only be accounting for teacher and support staff perceptions. This will be a threat to the external validity knowing it does not reflect perceptions of kindergarten teachers and support staff outside of the school district.
As stated earlier in this chapter, it's been acknowledged that the use of one site may be considered a weakness in qualitative research, but an intrinsic case study is particularly conducive to a study focused on one site. According to Schwartz-Yanow and Shea (2012), context plays an extremely important role in interpretive research.

The centrality of context to interpretive methods lends weight to treating contextuality as a more appropriate indicator of the achievements of interpretive research than its equivalent in positivist methodology; it is a better fit with interpretive methodological orientations to knowledge creation and use. (p. 48)

For this reason, the use of one site should not be considered a weakness of this study.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

Through the IRB plan necessary ethical considerations will be addressed. A clear agreement will be established with each participant through the recognition of confidentiality and informed consent. There will also be clear procedures for insuring full disclosure on the nature, purpose, and requirements of the research study. Participants are voluntary and free to withdraw at any time. There is minimal health and well-being risk to the participant. The interviews will be conducted as open-ended conversations so that misconceptions can be clarified. Any information provided that would be considered private or possibly damaging will be removed or disguised to protect the identity of the participant. Confidentiality will be maintained relevant to the data collected. The data will be kept by the researcher throughout the length of the study. It will be stored on the researcher’s hard drive which is password protected. All data will be erased by the researcher upon completion of the dissertation process.
Conclusion

Societal changes (dually working parents and single parent families) and more rigorous academic accountability (state standards and high stakes testing) have led to an increased popularity for children to attend a full day kindergarten as opposed to the traditional half-day kindergarten model. In addition, numerous research studies have validated that students who attend full day kindergarten programs develop academic and social skills a greater rate than their half-day counterparts. These factors have led many parents, school districts, and policy makers to investigate avenues to provide full day kindergarten for all students. Unfortunately, grant funding and lottery systems fall short in providing all students with a full day kindergarten experience so many districts are faced with providing both half-day and full-day kindergarten programs until more permanent and sustaining solutions can be found.

It is quite possible that students in a full day vs. a half day kindergarten are experiencing distinctly different programing yet all students have the same expectations for achievement placed on them. The literature identifies many distinctions between full and half day kindergarten. It also acknowledges the importance of play and its relationship to learning. However, an examination of the experiences of teachers who have taught both in full and half-day kindergarten programs in providing for play and its relationship to learning has not been studied. This problem has led to the following research question: How do teachers who have taught both full and half-day kindergarten programs experience play based teaching methods and instruction practices in the development of student academic and social skills?

To answer the research question a qualitative approach is necessary. In this intrinsic case study interview questions will be posed in such a way that the experiences of the practitioners
who have taught in both half- and full-day kindergarten settings, will provide the opportunity to identify instructional methods and practices that enhance academic and social skills in kindergarten students. The purpose of using this theory is to better understand how practitioners perceive the teaching methods and instructional practices that impact the learning experiences of their students.
Chapter 4: Findings

Research has shown that along with an increase in academic expectations, students who attend full day kindergarten display greater gains both academically and socially than their half-day counterparts. However, an examination of the experiences of teachers who have taught both in full and half-day kindergarten programs in providing for play and its relationship to learning has not been studied. The purpose of this qualitative intrinsic case study was to reveal the experiences of teachers who have taught both full and half-day kindergarten with regard to their experiences in play based teaching methods and practices in their classrooms in order to answer the following research question: How do teachers who have taught in both full and half-day kindergarten programs experience play based teaching methods and instructional practices in the development of student academic and social skills?

Four kindergarten teachers were interviewed. In addition, artifacts were gathered in the form of professional development offerings for the 2015-2016 school year and brief observations of the classrooms.

Table 1 outlines the four kindergarten teachers that were identified for the study. All participants have taught at least one year of full day and half-day kindergarten. To maintain confidentiality, participants chose a pseudonym. The following pseudonyms were used: Luanne, Elizabeth, Scoop, and Maria.
Table 1

Summary of Demographic Characteristics of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Highest Degree Earned</th>
<th>Years of Teaching</th>
<th>Years in Half Day K</th>
<th>Years in Full Day K</th>
<th>Other Grades Taught</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Luanne</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>CAGs pending</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Grade 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Preschool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scoop</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Preschool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Grade 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Luanne.** Luanne is in her mid-forties and has been teaching for eighteen years. Her entire teaching career has been in this same school district. She has taught third grade and kindergarten. She taught eleven years in third grade, two years in half-day kindergarten and now this is her fifth-year teaching full-day kindergarten. She holds both a Bachelor’s Degree and Master’s Degree in Early Childhood Education and is currently enrolled in a CAGs program for Educational Leadership. She holds a Massachusetts teaching license in Early Childhood Education (PreK-3) with and without disabilities.

**Elizabeth.** Elizabeth is in her mid-forties and has been teaching for twenty-seven years. Her first 20 years, she taught preschool in many different arenas, ranging from day care centers, private preschools, family child care, licensed small preschool programs, and she also served as a trainer of preschool teachers. She has taught kindergarten at this school for the past 7 years. Five
of those years have been in half day kindergarten, and two have been in full day kindergarten which she currently teaches. She holds a Bachelor’s Degree in Early Childhood Education and a Master’s Degree in Child Development. She holds a Massachusetts teaching license in Early Childhood Education (PreK-3) with and without disabilities.

**Scoop.** Scoop is in her early fifties and has been teaching for ten years. Her entire teaching career has been in this same school district. She has taught preschool and kindergarten. She taught two years in preschool and eight years in kindergarten. She taught five years in full day kindergarten and three years in half day kindergarten. She is currently teaching half-day kindergarten. She holds Bachelor’s Degrees in Elementary Education and Physical Education. She has a Master’s Degree in Special Education. She holds Massachusetts teaching licenses in Elementary Education, Special Education and Early Childhood Education.

**Maria.** Maria is in her mid-forties and has been teaching for eleven years. Her entire teaching career has been in this same school district. She has taught third grade and kindergarten. She taught three years in third grade, three years in half-day kindergarten and now this is her fifth year teaching full-day kindergarten. She holds Bachelor’s and Master’s Degrees in Early Childhood Education. She holds a Massachusetts teaching license in Early Childhood Education (PreK-3) with and without disabilities.

The researcher determined key factors in play-based learning by analyzing themes from interview data. Each participant was interviewed individually twice (an initial and a follow up session). Each interview lasted between thirty and sixty minutes. Participants were asked a total of twenty questions (appendix 1). The questions were developed to align with the research question and with the Constructivist Learning Theories of Lev Vygotsky.
The first interview served to capture background information on each candidate that addressed their teaching experiences as well as their instructional practices for play based teaching and learning. A follow up interview provided the researcher with information that provided more in-depth detail around the topics that were discussed.

Several steps were taken to ensure the trustworthiness of this study. First, the researcher used member checks during the study by providing responses to participants for accuracy. Second, the researcher utilized prolonged engagement having been a teacher, assistant principal and then principal of the school in which the study was done. Third, the researcher invited all kindergarten teachers from this site who had taught in both half-day and full-day settings to participate in the study and four chose to participate. This eliminated bias in choice of participants.

The remainder of this chapter is divided into three sections. The first section reviews artifacts that are pertinent to the methods and instructional practices that the participants employ. Section two used interview data in the form of narratives to present the participants’ understanding and use of play based methods and practices in their teaching experiences and cross-matrices to present the major themes that have been identified in the narratives. The final section summarizes the findings resulting from the themes of the study and concludes this chapter.

Physical Artifact Data

In addition to focused interviews, physical artifacts pertinent to teaching methods and instructional practices were reviewed in the form of professional develop offerings that were provided to the participants over the past year (Appendix 2) as well as classroom observations.
(included in the interview narratives). These artifacts provided a broader prospective on the participants’ teaching methods and instructional practices beyond the interview data.

It is noteworthy that the professional development opportunities do not address specific kindergarten teaching methods aligned to this study.

**Interview Data Analysis**

Each participant was interviewed individually with follow up interviews conducted as needed. Each individual transcript was coded to provide a profile of meaning. Passages were then collected into a narrative. The narratives of each individual were then synthesized with other participants to create a cross-matrix analysis of meaning within and between participants. Results describe the meaning of instruction and play in teaching kindergarten in a full and half-day setting.

**Interview Narratives and Classroom Observations**

**Luanne** was very enthusiastic to discuss the topic of play based instruction and noted that she has conducted research on the topic through her own studies. Her perspective on the use of play-based learning was to deliver curriculum using play as a context for learning. Although she noted in her interview that she was never formally taught how to implement play based learning methods in her teaching, she indicated that it just seemed that it was natural. Her perspective was that the work of being a child is playing, so it just seemed kind of a natural progression that they should be playing while learning at the same time. Luanne’s concept of play based learning was providing students opportunities to play, not just having them sit down with paper and pencil all the time.
When it came to her role in a play-based learning environment, Luanne referred to herself as a facilitator. She finds herself telling the students *here* everything you need, what can you do with it? In the role of a facilitator she supports students in their learning by creating or fostering the interactions they have with the materials and with one another. She states, *I'm* the person who might sit back, watch and then engage the child in conversation about what they *are* building or what they *are* playing or what they *are* doing. I facilitate conversations between students—teach them how to interact with each other and question each other. She spoke about the need for students to acquire social skills and for the teacher to be able to meet students where they are and bring them to the next level. *I think that they [students] need to have the ability and the desire to interact. That's when the teacher would be able to intervene and say, all right, well this student needs explicit instruction on how to take turns or how to not win or how to ask for help.*

She also incorporates social skill lessons from the Second Step Program and relies on support staff (occupational therapist) to reinforce the needed skills. Her thoughts on play as a social practice did not assume learning in a group context but included individual play. *Sometimes the best play that I've seen is just in someone's own imagination where they *are* building and they *are* into it. It doesn’t even have to be with somebody else.*

Luanne felt that there was additional time required to plan for play based learning as opposed to traditional planning because *there’s* no plan book that goes along with it. *There’s* no teacher's manual that goes along with it. In this form of planning she will compile activities that fit what I was trying to incorporate into my learning through play. A lot of the time consumption comes from a place of not being able to assume the direction of the lesson and reacting to
teachable moments instead of a scripted text. It takes a long time because some things you might think are going to go a certain way and then you have to get rid of them.

When it came to discussing classroom management Luanne felt challenged by the importance of managing the class. The teacher needs to have good management skills because play is fun but it can be out of control chaos. She speaks to the importance of having a well-managed environment in order to be able to support movement as part of the student day. When listening to teachers talk she would hear a lot about behaviors and this one can't sit still and this one is always fidgeting and moving around. She feels those distracting behaviors are a direct result of never giving them [students] a chance to move around and play. Luanne summed up her philosophy on a well-managed environment by stating that you have to have students that know what the parameters are; you have to set them up for success.

At times during the interview Luanne appeared frustrated with her inability to utilize play based methods and practices more regularly stating in today's academic world we forget that kids are kids. We forget that they are five. As a professional practitioner, Luanne provided a clear focus on presenting learning through play. It gets important for us to be able to step back and look at how we can incorporate play, games and fun back into learning because we were setting a lot of kids up for failure. School might be a struggle, but you can still have fun, play and try to figure things out in a different way. Although there were many essential elements of play based learning that were covered throughout the interview, Luanne noted teacher confidence and administrative expectations as two crucial components to making it a reality in today's kindergarten classrooms. We're so busy doing things that are definitely not developmentally
appropriate with curriculum and academics that we forget that there's a place for it (play) and that we need to meet the developmental needs.

A brief observation of Luanne's classroom was conducted (while no students were in the room) to identify elements of a play-based learning environment. When asked for examples of play-based learning, her response was "two different types of play: structured play that I design and then the informal play where I give them materials, and opportunity to experiment and work through it." The physical layout of the room consisted of both table settings and open rug space. A sand and water table were in the back corner. Many buckets were stacked on the shelves under the window containing blocks, Legos, counters, puzzles, and books. In another corner of the classroom there were empty food boxes (cereal, crackers, pasta) and a bucket of coins. Student artwork was hanging on the wall. It was evident in both the physical layout and with the classroom materials on display, that centers are a big component of her play-based instruction and it was evident in her interview when she stated "in my class, I change centers every week, so every week I have to come up with four new centers or four centers that would go along with what the skill is. When the skills change from year to year because you don't do the same thing every week, it's a lot. It takes a lot of time. The observation of the classroom displayed the play-based instruction was a consistent method of teaching and learning in this setting.

Elizabeth's extensive background in preschool was very evident in her interview. She shared that most of her understanding and training in play-based learning came from her initial degree program at Wheelock College and former preschool experience like the one at Children's Hospital Child Care Center. Throughout the interview, she tended to make statements about
what she should be doing (in regards to play based learning) versus what she is currently doing. Statements like "if I had an aide in the classroom, I would absolutely be changing my reading group time to play based activities." It was very apparent during the interview that the majority of the responses she gave to the questions were more idealistic on what she would like her experiences to be rather than what is actually happening in her classroom. In response to how she would teach academics and manage her classroom environment, she would preface her remarks with "if I was able to..." and "I would love to be able to." She shared that to her [Play-based teaching is] finding a way of teaching a core curriculum standard in a way that is developmentally appropriate, hands on, engaging, and has a social aspect. She expressed the importance of having a group dynamic, where the students have to interact and engage with each other; work together as an important component to play based learning. She indicated on many occasions throughout the interview about the importance of always making sure that there’s a recording element so that she can check in with them and parents can know what they're doing.

In regards to her role in a play based classroom Elizabeth stated that the best role, the role that a teacher should have in play, is to facilitate. As a facilitator, she felt the teacher should be observant supporting the interactions and being able to help the children reflect on the experience. When speaking about a play based classroom environment in kindergarten Elizabeth spent some time talking about the important prerequisite skills of being able to get along with their peers, cooperate with their peers, work together with their peers. She felt students could really get lost in a play based environment if their focus tends to be too much on the social interaction and not on having meaningful experiences and really be able to
problem solve and really explore whatever it is, whether it's a topic or whether it's materials.

Like Luanne, Elizabeth spoke about the use of a social skills program called Second Step, explaining how it is one of the ways that we try to foster or build those needed (prerequisite) skills.

Planning for play-based learning versus the more traditional academic learning emphasized less of a focus on worksheets and more of a focus on materials. Some of the examples of materials she referenced were making our site words out of play-doh, and then recording which ones were made. Then picking the one that was your favorite and writing a sentence about it, and maybe illustrating if you have time. She spoke about the questioning strategies that promote thought and problem-solving. When planning for those types of questions you can expect answers with a one-word answer or that has a correct answer; it will have a myriad of answers, that could be answered in a million different ways and that . . . for lack of a better word . . . facilitates them to go deeper.

Elizabeth indicated that the teacher needs to set the tone as to, yes we're playing, but these are our learning tools. She expressed her concern for students not coming in with the necessary social skills to have the ability to be able to get along with their peers, cooperate with their peers, work together with their peers; without those there is more behavior management, and less time on tasks. She noted the importance of giving students opportunities to practice on the playground, in the cafeteria, and during snack time to be able to develop those social skills. As a person who's studied child development and a kindergarten teacher, Elizabeth is confident that play-based methods are the best way . . . our best practice. And as much as she believes that to be true she also feels the pressure to meet the standard, the pressure to use the
given curriculum, the pressure to get it all done in the time allotted and the lack of support and
the big class sizes. It's very frustrating for her to know what's right but not feel like you can
do what's right. Unlike the other participants, Elizabeth referenced many times throughout her
interview about the need to have proportionate teacher: student ratios. Large class sizes (20+)
and lack of paraprofessional support hindered the classroom teacher's ability to properly
implement and facilitate play based learning. She noted in her interview that the most
disappointing aspect of play based learning in her classroom is that she unable to facilitate play
with the lack of support to assist small group skill work. She supported that claim by stating I
found that I every time I try to do play based activities in a classroom of 21 children, 20 children
with no aide, it's very, very difficult to be able to manage that and be working with a small
group. She confirmed that concern by stating with proper support staff, there's a possibility I
could maybe twice a week say to a classroom aide, I want you to run this lesson, and I'm going
to circulate today. With properly trained staff and a good collaborative setting, where we could
switch roles and feel comfortable in both roles. Elizabeth also referenced the half day
kindergarten program that is still offered at the school by stating in half-day, it's very
minimal time to foster those needed skills. Second step we squeeze in ... we've lost over most of
it ... we have a recess once a week and snack time. It's really very minimal time for any
socialization so any facilitation essentially is very slim in a half-day.

A brief observation of Elizabeth's classroom was conducted while no students were in
the classroom. The purpose of the observation was to identify evidence of a play based learning
environment. Like Luanne's classroom, Elizabeth's room also had an area with tables and chairs
and an open carpeted area. Elizabeth's classroom also contained a library area with multiple
shelves of books, oversized books and large pillows. Math mats and manipulatives were out on the tables. In this setting the play based materials all appeared to be more academic in nature (math manipulatives) as oppose to more traditional play materials (blocks, sand table, etc). What was observed in her classroom validated how her concerns about the current climate are impacting her teaching. When she stated "I just think that as a kindergarten teacher I know that play-based methods are the best way ... our best practice. Especially as a person who's studied child development, I understand it but also I have to say that the pressure to meet the standard, the pressure to use the given curriculum, the pressure to get it all done in the time allotted and the lack of support and the big class sizes. It's very frustrating as a teacher to know what's right but not feel like you can do what's right. That's where I struggle right now this researcher could better understand why the classroom was more traditional.

Scoop was the only participant interviewed that is currently teaching half-day kindergarten (as oppose to full day). Many of her responses focused more on her half day experiences as oppose to her experiences in full day kindergarten and she stated that she is "teaching half day, so my types of play are limited because of the time constraints. She saw play-based teaching as "hands-on activities that students run however, she felt "spending a half hour on math instead of an hour just limits what you can do. She did mention that she tries to "do math centers on Fridays, or on days where some of my students will go to a computer lab, so that the students can move from center to center. When asked about the percentage of time that is spent in structured versus unstructured learning she stated "about 10% of play-based learning in the half day program is unstructured. 90% of the Play-based learning is structured with a product that needs to be complete at the end. Even with the limitation of time she believed that...
the teacher should be the facilitator acting as a "guide," and the students should be "learning
cognitively, socially, emotionally, physically, and linguistically." In reference to her role as a
facilitator she stated "I need to be the guide, the person that just goes around and stands back for
a couple minutes, see how they're doing, see if they can solve it themselves. It's great. I've got
my clipboard, and I'm informal assessing all over the place, because I'm watching them solve
their own problems, or I'm watching them have a peer step in and help them out with a problem.
I'd say that's what teachers should be doing, is more facilitating, and guiding, and pushing them
when they need it." With the restrictions of a half day setting Scoop talked about certain times
of the year when play based learning works best. "There are days, specific days, when we can
add a lot of play-based learning, like the hundredth day, when we do lots of centers about a
hundred."

Social interactions were at the heart of play based learning in her classroom. She spoke
about "those moments that I can watch the kids through play-based learning and how it
provides her with an opportunity to observe student interactions and use language skills. She
feels play based learning fosters student interactions from even "those kids that won't raise their
hands in class, you see them interacting with other children." As the teacher, play based teaching
requires the teacher to "be a good planner, facilitator, and get the activities ready and age-
appropriate." This makes planning more challenging and time consuming than traditional
planning and teaching. "Play based planning is more about the process and not the product." She
talked about the need to ask broader questions like "Tell me about your center time today?" She
wants her students to be able to tell her what they learned by explaining what they are doing,
what their peers are doing, what centers they choose and why?
Scoop referenced using the Responsive Classroom approach so that every student is taught in the first six weeks of school the social expectations needed to have successful learning experiences in her classroom. When you have the students make the rules and consequences students will own them and then you are building an environment where everyone gets along and treats each other as they would want to be treated themselves. She followed that statement by making a connection to an element of the Responsive Classroom program in claiming that for everyone to get their hopes and dreams we must have rules and consequences. During one part of the interview Scoop spoke about how the classroom dynamics can negatively impact the effectiveness of a play based environment. She noted there are some classes that students can't handle play-based learning, because they've been together too long, or because the mix of children. However, then she went on to say that most children do not need to be taught to play but will learn the social skills of play through play. And she had first hand evidence of children with no language at all play appropriately in a play based learning environment. She also has seen children of two different countries with no common language play and learn together.

When discussing the benefits of play based learning she made the statement about students being able to tell you more than you will ever get from a multiple-choice paper. Through a play based approach to teaching and learning students are using language to explain and understand the concepts that you are trying to teach.

Scoop confirmed, with statements like, there is so much pressure when speaking about her hesitation to utilize play based methods and practices consistently in her classroom. She spoke about the mandates of having to teach to the test and teach to the standards. She often talked with colleagues about how they're not getting a true picture of the child. With more
play-based learning situations she could be assured that students know the skills because she would have observed through play. She feels bad for her students that there is so much pressure and often hears that parents are in shock that there is so much work to be done and asking where is the play? She feels restrictions by having to do an hour and a half of reading and a half hour of math and guilty for not doing the amount of writing that she feels she should be doing. The constant juggle of trying to fit everything in seems to be increasing over the years. She recalls when I was back student teaching even twenty years ago, the more hands-on we could do, the better. We've gotten away from it, because this is where the drive is at this point, sadly.

A visit to Scoop's classroom was conducted while nobody was in the room to identify elements of a play based learning environment. Scoop's classroom had an open rug area where students could gather and four sets of tables and chairs. There were puppets and books on the counter. Also, there was an area in the classroom that had a variety of colored paper, crayons, and markers. There was also a CD player on a table with a variety of musical CDs. This classroom setting has a physical layout consistent of a play based learning environment (large open rug area) but the play based materials that were observed (puppets) were not accessible to students at the given time. There were no signs that play based learning activities had occurred that day. Although Scoop had referenced during her interview, using counters, unifix cubes, shaving cream writing, and all those things... that helps kids that just can't get yet none of those elements were visible to this researcher.

Maria presented to be the most reserved in sharing her personal feelings on the topic of play-based learning (as referenced by the limited answers reflected in the tables below). All
participants were provided the interview questions ahead of time and Maria prepared written notes to refer to during her interview. To ensure that all participants felt at ease during the interviews the notes were allowed however, it appeared to have restricted the conversational atmosphere that was more apparent in the other three interviews. It’s undetermined whether or not more detail and personal feelings would have been shared had the notes not been utilized.

To Maria, play-based teaching means learning through play and social interaction, when children can explore learning through games, manipulative, blocks, and other physically engaging activities. She noted times of the day when students can most often be seen learning through play by stating that she has play during some portions of the day, during my literacy groups most of the time. Some of the children are independent at this time so they get to choose an activity, play with a friend. She stated that some play based activities include games, which focus on literacy skills, such as rhyming games, phonics games. She provides a variety of materials to support play such as Wiki sticks, whiteboards, magnetic letters, cookie sheets, practice letters, and building words. She also spoke about students creating imaginary scenarios such as playing school. One student might be the teacher, the other student, they get to sit on the teacher’s stool and role play. Maria described the play based opportunities in her classroom as more of a hybrid of true play and traditional learning practices. She talked about in math using manipulatives every single day, walking around and seeing what they’re doing with the manipulatives as far as building and using their imaginations, using them appropriately during the lesson then letting students play with the manipulatives afterwards.

Maria feels strongly about the play, allowing children to develop social skills as well as problem-solving skills. They learn to work with a friend by sharing, taking turns, and solving
problems when needed. She also noted that play builds important communication skills. They're having real-life conversations, asking questions, and providing feedback to one another. Students are building their confidence as well. The students become comfortable with each other as well as their surroundings. Maria would like to increase play based learning opportunities in her classroom for next year by having centers, hopefully maybe three times a week for a half hour, where the children can explore different areas.

As for her role in play based learning Maria noted this as a limitation stating don't play much of a role in play-based learning during independent time, because that's when I have my reading groups, so I get to watch from a distance. However, when provided the opportunity outside of reading group time she can hear the conversations, see the interactions, asking questions, having real life conversations with one another.

To be successful in a play based learning environment, Maria believes students need to have strong language skills as well as social skills. She spoke about opportunities for students to acquire these skills prior to even attending kindergarten. She claims, if students have been exposed to lots of books, have had parent led conversations, playdates with friends, and read aloud, they can be gaining those needed social skills and building a foundation early on.

When speaking about the planning required for play based instruction Maria commented about traditional planning coming right out of a Math or Literacy program yet play based teaching required a lot more open ended questioning techniques. She shared some questions that she often asks such as Tell me about what you're doing? How can you solve the problem? What else can you show me? How can you sort those objects? Tell me more about what you're creating? Where did you learn about that? She spoke about the management of the
play based centers by stating “play based centers will always be changing. The students are the drivers and will navigate what works and what doesn’t as far as what materials to put out for them to explore with.”

Maria feels the students learn best from each other. She loves to listen to them bounce ideas off one another and problem solve together without any teacher intervention. Although that sounds to be an ideal learning situation it doesn’t occur as often as she would like. She believes that as educators we are caught up in the believe that when it comes to play based learning there are so many other things we need to be doing that “there’s not time for that.” She did however note that even beyond her limited classroom time she can foster the benefits of play based learning. She shared how she loves to watch them during recess as well, especially during indoor recess, to see how creative they get with play and how well they work together in groups of three to four students.

An observation of Maria’s classroom was conducted while students were out of the room to observe aspects of a play based learning environment. Like the other three participants in the study, Maria also had an area for tables and chairs and an open rug area where students could gather. The shelves contained many board games and buckets of manipulatives such as tile letters, unifix cubes, and counters. Like Elizabeth, Maria had an area designated as the classroom library with many shelves of books and throw pillows. In this setting, although the physical layout of the classroom was conducive to play based learning, at the time of the observation there was no visible sign that it was taking place on that day.
Themes

Five themes emerged from the data contained in the interviews that described play-based learning and its impact on kindergarten teachers and their students. Four teachers from the same site who have all had experience teaching full and half day kindergarten shared their perceptions on their teaching methods and how they impact the students they serve. The narratives focus on the five identified areas: advocacy for play-based learning, perceived impact of the teacher, awareness of outcomes, perceived challenges associated with play-based teaching and learning, and reflections on the meaning from external decisions.

Theme 1 - Advocacy for Play Based Learning

The first theme addressed teacher advocacy for play-based learning in kindergarten. Specifically, what benefit does play-based learning provide for students?

The teachers continuously advocated for play-based learning as the only appropriate way for kindergarten students to acquire mastery of needed academic and social skills. At every interview participants spoke with passion about play-based learning and its ability to focus on the whole child. Scoop captured this with her statement "Play strengthens the whole child." Learning was cognitive, social, and emotional. Elizabeth's sentiments on the impact of play-based learning captured all the key components when teaching a young child. She stated, "Play based teaching is finding a way of teaching a core curriculum standard in a way that is developmentally appropriate, hand-on, engaging, and has a social aspect."

Play based learning captured developmental needs. The universal need to play thus becomes a familiar format to experience new and different concepts. Elizabeth captured that in saying "children make meaning of the world around them through play experiences."
investment in play that supports students’ ability to immerse themselves in the learning. Maria confirmed that notion through stating, “when children can explore learning physically with engaging activities and social interaction they are more invested in their learning.”

Engaging in learning took learning from the traditional classroom approach of sitting with a pencil in hand and a paper on the desk to exploring through physical and verbal engagement. Elizabeth talked about the play dynamic where students interact and engage with each other in learning. The teachers used words such as hands-on, engaging, and interactive to describe the play based experiences that their students need. The engagement is not only motivating to students but it also provides them with valuable opportunities to practice and learn vital skills. Such skills included communication, taking turns and sharing, leadership and working within a group dynamic of interaction and engagement. The social aspect of play based learning also reinforced the academic skills as Maria commented on how she witnesses students having real life conversations, asking questions of one another, and providing feedback to one another.

Learning through play was also seen to build confidence in students. Students become more comfortable with one another and their surroundings. Scoop mentioned how she has certain students that will never raise their hand in a whole class discussion or to answer a question but, I can see that student interacting in a small group of students and can better assess that student’s level of understanding.

Varying learning settings from individual, to partner, to group was an essential element. Luanne stated “they don’t have to play with someone else. Sometimes the best play I’ve seen is just in someone’s own imagination where they’re building.” The flexible use of settings allowed
for accommodating and meeting student learning needs thus allowing them to move forward and learn the skills in a self-paced manner. In using groups, Elizabeth shared “there is always a balance and a need to vary the groupings based on the skill, level of need, and management of other tasks that need to be accomplished.”

Varying the use of learning/play tools also allowed for flexibility in meeting the needs of the whole child. Materials in a play based setting hold significance in translating the play to meaning. Elizabeth shared the following statement about the importance of the materials she chooses.

“The focus on materials because that's really the foundation of what you're trying to get from them in play-based learning so if you're ... whatever the topic you're working on ... you're really spending a lot of time maybe in deep reflection on what material could I present that might spark a certain discussion or a certain experience that would translate into mastery of a certain common core standard?”

Overall, the meaning of play based learning was viewed as a crucial to learning for a kindergarten student’s social and academic development.

Observations of classrooms validated the use of play-based learning. It was noted that the rooms are all set up to accommodate varied groupings. Tables and a large rug area could accommodate group work or independent activities. Many of the materials mentioned in the interviews were also witnessed in the classroom observations.

Teacher views and insights of play based learning placed them in the role of advocates who held passionate beliefs of the importance of providing play as a developmental requirement of learning in kindergarten and the need for educators to do so. It was difficult for them to
separate the two. As such, they saw learning as addressing needed skills beyond academics. Play based methods allow teachers the opportunity to impact physical (gross and fine motor), cognitive, language, literacy, social, and emotional development in students simultaneously, often referred to as a “whole child” teaching approach. The value of embedding curiosity, exploration, and creativity in learning were indispensable.

Of equal importance was social development that draws on the group dynamic of interaction and engagement resulting in self-confidence. The learning tools were the hook to grab student attention and allow them the ability to “play” their way through their learning by growing their physical, emotional and cognitive skills. Whether it’s structured or unstructured play, whole group, small group, partner, or individual grouping, each experience in a play based kindergarten classroom is deliberate in helping to shape the social and academic readiness of a young student. A student’s confidence level is bolstered by their academic successes at a young age. Growth mind sets are well researched to have significant impact on the academic success of a student. Students need to be set up for success for them to achieve at high levels. A student’s academic skill toward mastery is a process that needs to carefully monitored and molded to ensure that it’s developmentally appropriate, challenging, yet not frustrating. The structure of a play based classroom allows teachers to readily observe this and nurture it for optimal success.

Theme 2 - Perceived Impact of the Teacher in a Play Based Classroom

The second theme addressed how teachers understood the impact they had on learning in a play based learning environment. Teachers in this study interpreted their role in play based learning as a facilitator. The instruction was more open ended as opposed to directed. In an
open-ended form of learning students are driving the instruction and not being held back by a page in the teacher manual that dictates the topic for the day. Luanne shared that as the facilitator she is the “person who might sit back, watch and then engage the child in conversation about what they’re building or what they’re playing or what they’re doing.” The typical teaching roles of directing, questioning, and reflecting now were a shared responsibility of the students. Facilitating meant enhancing the learning experience for students by giving them more ownership in their learning. As facilitators, they were teaching students, as Luanne stated “how to interact with each other and question each other.”

There was a clear perception of the need to understand the balance it takes to be able to support and guide in a productive manner that enhances the learning experience and doesn’t frustrate the learner. Elizabeth shared that as the facilitator “you should be able to certainly not jump in and take over, but you should be observant and supporting the interactions.” Significant meaning was found in the opportunity to see students interact with their peers, explore and problem solve. In a traditional classroom setting, with the teacher serving more as a lecturer, this level of engagement in students is far more difficult to foster.

The classroom teacher supports the students so that they can gain the confidence and independence needed to be able to support their own learning. Luanne stated that it’s her job to help the student “think about what they’re doing and help them come up with the purpose of what they’re doing.” Elizabeth added that it provides “a chance to be able to help the children reflect on the experience.”

The extensive significance of one-to-one conversation with students about their play was seen to provide a key to student learning. Asking questions was an essential component of such
communication. It allows teachers the opportunity to hear about a student’s big ideas as Maria put it.

Luanne shared that she would use open ended questions and relate those questions back to the skills that students were learning through play. She shared the following example of how that could be accomplished.

Oh, you're playing with a car, what's a word that rhymes with car? It could be something just as simple as that when you're teaching rhyming.

Knowing and planning for the types of questions that should be asked to promote thought and problem-solving was a perceived necessary skill. As Elizabeth shared there should not be a question that has a one-word answer or that has one correct answer, (it's one) that has a myriad of answers, that could be answered in a million different ways and that ... for lack of a better word ... facilitates them to go deeper.

The value of questions designed to promote thought and problem-solving allowed the teacher an opportunity to assess the level of understanding and guide the teacher on next steps in planning. Some examples of the types of questions were Tell me about what you're doing! How can you solve the problem? What else can you show me? How can you sort those objects? Tell me more about what you're creating. Where did you learn about that?

Through the uses of questioning and observing a teacher could witness the cognitive development that occurring through unstructured (creative) and structured (inquiry based) play.

The importance of planning was perceived as an essential element of teaching. Scoop's claim of play based planning is more about the process and not the product solidified that, teacher planning was an essential requirement in the provision of opportunities for students to
engage in structured and unstructured learning and to talk with peers and with their teacher. This process of learning had a much greater impact than a completed product that was to be hung up or sent home. The planning necessitated meticulous care to provide activities that were developmentally appropriate and with the teachers interviewed, it wasn’t always acquired on the first attempt. Luanne recalled that planning ‘takes a long time because some things you might think are going to go a certain way and then you have to get rid of them.’

The manipulative tools that were chosen to support academic concepts carried great significance for teachers as well. Luanne shared information about her block area and how students just think they are building a structure and I might talk to them about how many solid shapes they are using. Teachers would utilize some of the same tools (such as blocks) to address multiple concepts throughout the year. However, in a play based setting it didn’t always need to be a basic object like a block. It could sometimes be teacher created rhyming or phonics games for literacy.

The value of creativity was directly connected to the choice of learning tools. When it came to non-traditional learning tools, Elizabeth spoke with excitement about one of her ideas for the future of her play based classroom in regards to materials.

‘One of the things that I would like to do is to have a dramatic play area or center where there is lots of just empty boxes of food items. There might be cheese boxes and they might have a cash register or maybe just be a really big calculator and not really set up a store but have the materials that could potentially be used as a store. Not the papers and pencils all the time but being able to get all empty boxes of food materials for example. Things that are really dramatic play-based whatever it is that they seem to be
focused and interested in, that you have the kind of materials that are going to support that and also support whatever your standard is that you're trying to get them to.

In addition to the academic and social skills that are solidified through play based methods, Scoop highlighted the point that with all the different materials that are being used to make meaning of their learning, students are also simultaneously refining their sensory and motor skills.

The worth of both essential structured and unstructured learning opportunities to children of this age was pivotal in providing young students an opportunity to explore and take their learning in new and different ways. Maria shared that about 90% of the play based learning is structured and takes place during our afternoon meeting when we use the smartboard to play interactive games or sing songs connected to a concept. However, a more unstructured time for her class would be during her literacy block when students can either play board games with each other or they can choose open ended activities such as white boards, writing paper, wiki sticks or chalk boards to practice any skill they choose. This is the time when she can assess if their structured learning time is having lasting effects on their long-term retrieval of skills.

The impact of teacher planning and facilitating were viewed as highly structured in a play-based classroom. However, the activities that are so precisely orchestrated are specifically designed to look unstructured. This form of planning for play would engage students in building many academic skills including sorting, ordering, classifying, counting, patterning, storytelling, experimenting, and explaining without them specifically being told that the purpose for their play. Luanne stated that the students may not necessarily know the actual skill I want them to
learn, but I’ve given them a framework to structure their learning. That planned structure and framework would then lead them to learning the needed skills.

The impact a teacher has on a play based learning classroom begins long before the students enter the classroom. The planning of materials, activities, and questioning strategies set the scene for the learning that would take place. As a facilitator, the teacher is charged with formulating and maintaining a learning environment that creates and supports the skills required for learning. Above and beyond learning the academic skills, it’s imperative that students acquire the essential primary skills that allows them to be able to take turns, share materials, follow a given set of rules, anticipate logical consequences, and respect the classroom and school materials. For optimal outcomes students need to be part of the process in creating a learning atmosphere that is supportive and respectful of all learners. Social and academic skill sets can best be assessed by listening and observing students at play. Social interactions in a safe and respectful environment propel students to practice communicating through gestures, dialogues, debate, and other forms of verbal and nonverbal communication that best match their developmental level.

Academic skills can best be assessed through observation, questioning and demonstration. Although the academic teaching would not be as obvious as a teacher centered lecture from the front of the classroom, the compelling evidence of the academic skills that students are learning and mastering in play based are credited to the motivation and engagement that a play based teaching model provides. Through problem solving with peers and responding to open ended questioning from the teacher, students reinforce their mastery of concepts. As one
teacher stated “If they’re five years old they should be playing and if they’re five years old then they should be learning, then they should be putting the two together to make it successful.”

Through classroom observations it was evident that all materials have a proper place to be stored with visual signage representing where the materials go. This displayed evidence that the students had ownership of their classrooms and easily recognize the proper place to find and store needed materials. Posters in all the classrooms displayed rules and consequences to support a respectful learning environment. Student “Hopes and Dreams” pictures were displayed in three of the settings. These types of environments supported students’ abilities to own their learning experiences.

**Theme 3 - Awareness of Outcomes in Play Based Learning**

The third theme addressed the how academic and social skills were acquired by students in a play based learning environment. As teachers had strongly advocated the importance of providing play based learning for students through the substantial impact teaching had on a play based learning environment, they realized the essential importance of student outcomes in determining the true effectiveness of the learning environment.

The significant need to assess the alleged differences in student skills derived from home, pre-school, day care environments is considered and factored in when assessing student learning outcomes in a play based kindergarten.

Upon entering kindergarten, to optimize the learning experience, a set of early (prerequisite) skills that would enable students to get along with their peers, cooperate and collaborate with their peers, and use problem solving skills was determined. Luanne shared that
Students need to come in with a generalized knowledge of how to get along with someone. Although students come in with varied experience levels, Scoop shared that every student is taught in the first six weeks of school that we all want to have successful learning experiences in our classrooms. By identifying the current skill sets of students, teachers were scaffolders for needed skills with new learning for optimal benefits.

Luanne shared that students need to be able to get along with peers just as much as they need to learn how to read. A deliberate sequence of social skill lessons can transform into lessons that not only enhance social skills but ultimately impact a student's ability to acquire academic skills.

Integrating play and learning influences the effectiveness of reinforcing, practicing, and mastering of skills. In her statement below, Luanne acknowledged opportunities to utilize play methods in all aspects of learning.

I think it's important in every stage of learning. You can certainly be introducing a concept through play and then bring it into the academic realm and then give them practice through play while they're learning the skill and to review and follow up. I think it's good for all pieces of it. It's not just a one-shot deal. I think it expands through all of those areas, or it should.

Teachers logically assessed mastery of skills through their interactions with students by listening to students and talking with them. Maria shared that even through observation of peer interactions she could evidence mastery of skills.

Just by listening to their conversations, I can tell who is getting the concept and who isn't. For those that are struggling, their peers are stepping in and helping them out. The
students thrive on being able to teach a friend what they already know. I feel the students learn best from each other, I love listening to them bounce ideas off one another and problem solve together without any teacher intervention. Scoop referred to it as “the student becoming the teacher.”

Play positively impacted learning that would otherwise be difficult to measure. Students could show what they knew and apply it to their play interactions. Scoop shared “It’s the informal assessment. When you have these play-based learning situations you can say I know this is where they scored on the test, but this is not what they know, because I’ve seen it.” In addition to skill mastery during social interactions, students learned the importance of intonation and inflection to make meaning of from conversations. By using literary props such as menus and grocery lists to practice adding skills, students developed emergent literacy skills such as print concepts. From there students began to build an understanding of the need for written language skills. The realization that there were boundless limits that a play based learning environment offers.

Since participants’ perceptions of play-based learning outcomes were embedded in social skill development, they were confident they could successfully teach a core curriculum standard in a way that is developmentally appropriate, hands-on, engaging, with a social aspect.

Accountability was also recognized as essential in play based learning outcomes. Elizabeth shared how “each play based activity usually has a recording element to it, so that there’s some accountability, so that I can check in with them, so that the parents can know what they’re doing.”
Teachers interpret a student’s learning through their social and academic skill sets. They found it difficult to separate the two because academic learning is a social experience for students in a play based classroom. Students are constantly making new meaning of the world around them through their social interactions with their peers. Regardless of whether a skill is being introduced, reinforced, or the learning setting is structured or unstructured, a play based approach allows students to combine their cognitive and linguistic abilities to form new meaning and make better connections with the world around them. Students may learn academic and social skills in different types of learning environments but in a play based learning environment the monitoring and assessing is happening in a more natural, developmentally appropriate manner where students can show what may never be measured on a test. As Luanne stated "It's important for us to be able to step back and look at how we incorporate play, games and fun back into learning because we are setting a lot of kids up for failure. School might be a struggle but you can still have fun, play and try to figure things out in a different way."

Beyond learning required curricular skills, students made meaning of all aspects of their world through play experiences. They learned through conversation with their teacher and peers and broadened their prospective on topics through open ended questions and answers. They build important communication skills as confirmed in Maria’s comments that students are having real life conversations, asking questions, and providing feedback to one another. By observing social interactions Luanne commented that she can find out what they (students) are thinking. When teachers observe students during play learning, they facilitate conversations, and more naturally determine the meaning they are making. Even in situations where students have minimal language skills or where there are language barriers, the teacher in a play based
classroom can still identify signs of social interactions and learning. Scoop stated “I have seen children with no language at all play appropriately and learn in a play based learning environment. I have also seen children of two different countries with no common language play and learn together.”

**Theme 4  Perceived Classroom Challenges for Play Based Teaching and Learning**

The fourth and final theme focused on the challenges that the teachers in this study faced in a play based learning environment. The prior themes stressed the importance of play based teaching and learning and the emphatic social and academic outcomes that result from it. Based on the prior themes one would be hard pressed to argue why play based learning methods aren’t the requirement of all kindergarten programs. However, play based teaching and learning settings are not challenge free. Below are three sub-themes that emerged.

**Sub-Theme - Planning Time**

Without a doubt play-based learning took a lot more planning than traditional instruction. Typically, traditional planning used a math or literacy program, manuals that guide the components of a lesson plan. Luanne shared that “there is no teacher manual to go along with play-based learning. The teacher is responsible to compile activities.” Although the two types of learning (play-based vs. traditional) focused on the same learning standards, the traditional approach typically had worksheets while the play-based required learning tools and set up. Planning involved determining the best materials to use, how to access them, and how to set them up so that they are used most effectively in a play based environment. Elizabeth commented that “you’re spending a lot of time maybe in deep reflection on what material could I
present that might spark a certain discussion or a certain experience that would translate into mastery of a certain common core standard. She saw the students as the drivers and the teachers need to navigate what works and what doesn’t as far as what materials are needed.

The combination of teacher planning and setting the stage for learning so that students navigate their learning required time. Maria spoke about how the balance of free play versus structured play had varied levels of planning. Both have value but a teacher needs to deliberately plan for both and be ready to abandon either one if they’re not serving the purpose that they are meant to. Especially at the beginning of a school year when a teacher may not know the students as well, it’s really a trial and error as to whether the materials are a right match for the purpose they should be serving in the lesson and the students ability to use the materials to meet the purpose of the lesson. Luanne shared that the teacher needs to be able to assess the value the materials are bringing to the lesson and may need to be ready to put them aside and come back to them later when the students are more prepared to make the connections to their learning. Materials that engaged students and captured their interest were fundamental to planning activities. Therefore, planning took time to compile activities that fit into the learning goal and then, when the outcomes were not satisfactory, additional time would be needed to recreate the activities. Luanne stated when the skills change from year to year because you don’t do the same thing every week, it’s a lot. It takes a lot of time. It certainly has to be something that you’re vested in and that you’re interested in and that you’re passionate about.

Another planning need that play based classrooms required is planning for small group learning centers. Many of the play-based learning opportunities in the classrooms of the teachers interviewed occurred through centers. As compared to traditional planning and teaching, Maria
noted that it’s challenging because play based centers will always be changing. The teachers created multiple learning centers that change on a daily and weekly basis. Teachers were faced with the daunting task to establish centers. Maria noted, “to change centers every week, so every week coming up with four new centers that would go along with the skill was a struggle.” In a typical play-based classroom setting there could be 3-5 learning centers established (to maintain small groupings at each center) for each subject. There could be up to 20 different centers planned each week. Due to the amount of planning involved in establishing centers Maria has set a manageable goal for next school year to have centers, hopefully three times a week for a half hour, where the children can explore different areas.

All participants perceived that that in addition to planning the learning centers and choosing the best match of materials, play based learning also required a teacher to plan effective questioning strategies to enhance and assess a student’s learning experience. Beyond open-ended questions that relate to the desired learning standards, questioning needed to be designed with the outcome of having students think for themselves and problem solve.

Sub-Theme - Behavior Management

The need for effective behavior management strategies for a play-based learning environment was essential. Students must see toys as learning tools by establishing what the tool is used for and why. As Luanne stated in her interview,

“The most difficult thing is managing the class. You have to set them up for success and just be able to manage it because play is fun but it can be out of control chaos. If it’s chaos then we’re not getting the point of learning through play across.”
Students don’t just enter kindergarten knowing what the expectations for classroom behavior are, students need to know what the parameters are for learning. Elizabeth noted that “it’s important for the teacher to set the tone as to, yes we’re playing, but these are our learning tools.”

Only through listening and observing can teachers clearly determine who may be having a hard time with taking turns or not being respectful of the tools. Therefore, specific mini lessons were provided for students to be able to move forward in their learning. In addition, behavior management needs were ever changing because every class had different strengths and weaknesses. Luanne shared, “Behavior management is not something that you can say, okay, I need to start with this (skill) and then go to this (skill) and go to that (skill). It can look very different from year to year, depending on the group of students you have and what they need for skills to be able to successfully access the play based learning environment.”

Play based learning classrooms were distinguished with a level of noise and movement that was unseen in a traditional learning environment of students seated at desks with a pencil and paper as the teacher lectured from the front of the room. For the necessary conversations and movement to occur in a play-based learning environment, effective behavior management was essential. Elizabeth noted “I think that probably the most difficult part is really managing the students, making sure there is clear expectations and follow through, because yes, they’re toys to the kids, but to the teacher they’re learning tools, and just making sure that the line between the two is drawn.” It was understood that a play based learning environment should
hear students talking and laughing and see movement. Teachers needed to be able to manage the movement, talking and laughing for productive learning to occur.

**Sub-Theme - Professional Development**

Throughout the interviews teachers talked about planning lessons, facilitating the learning and providing effective feedback all while managing the classroom environment. They required the need for good management skills to enhance time on task and impact learning outcomes. These components of teaching require skill to be able to effectively plan activities, determine materials, and facilitate meaningful play. Maria acknowledged the need for professional development in managing all those aspects of a play based classroom.

Professional development opportunities around time and behavior management as well as effective planning are crucial to the success of a play based learning environment. Luanne stated 'the teacher needs to have good management skills because play is fun but it can’t be out of control chaos.' With effective professional development, teachers build the skill set needed to effectively plan a lesson, facilitate the learning, and manage the environment for students to acquire the needed academic and social skills in a developmentally appropriate setting.

Through a review of the professional development offerings in the previous school year there were eighteen different professional development workshops offered to teachers over the course of the school year. All trainings fell into one of three categories; curriculum, social emotional learning, and technology. Not one training was focused on play based learning, behavior management, or effective planning strategies.
Theme 5  Reflections on the Meaning from External Decisions Beyond the Play Based Classroom

Sub-Theme - Half Day Setting

There were also variables that were beyond the teachers control yet impacted their ability to effectively utilize play based learning in their classrooms. The school site in this study still offers half day kindergarten in addition to the tuition based full day kindergarten. Teachers spoke about the effective use of time especially when teaching a half day program that has an abbreviated day. All teachers in the study have taught both half day and full day kindergarten so they knew firsthand the challenges that went along with having only half the amount of time to address all the leaning needs of their students. Scoop noted “obviously the most important thing that is holding me back is the time in a half-day program. You just can’t possibly get in all those moments. When I was full-day I had a block of time in the afternoon when I could have play-based centers both for literacy and for math. I would reinforce the skills that were taught throughout the week. I don’t have the time to do it now.”

Sub-Theme - State Mandates

It was apparent to all participants the academic demands to prepare students for state testing beginning in grade 3 has led to increasing the academic accountability in kindergarten. Given the number of Common Core (state) standards that need to be addressed in all content areas finds teachers feeling pressured to address them all adequately so that students can acquire mastery. Teachers struggled becomes the choice of whether to cover all standards at an introductory level or focus on a portion of them for mastery level was a challenge. When a school district is judged by its state scores it becomes the focal point. Administrators want
assurance that teachers are addressing the standards and preparing students to be able to successfully display their knowledge in a format like the state assessment system (MCAS). Scoop shared “we as teachers need to understand that student outcomes come for students in many different ways, and we need to let students experience more than one way of learning.” It’s troubling to know what is developmentally appropriate and not have that align with the academic atmosphere that the state has created. Elizabeth summed up the group’s thoughts by stating, “it’s very frustrating as a teacher to know what’s right but not feel like you can do what's right.”

**Sub-Theme - Teacher & Student Ratios**

Another element that was recognized as an impediment for play based teaching and learning is class size that has continued to increase each year. Teachers professed that for a young student, a reasonable class sizes of 15-18 students is most conducive to a play based learning environment. In that size classroom, students would have plenty of room to explore centers and manipulate the learning tools. They acknowledged that current class sizes of 20-24 students restricted the ability to focus attention on all the needs simultaneously. As a play based learning environment has lots of activities and conversations happening that the teacher needs to facilitate and provide feedback on, large class sizes were challenging. They identified that it became increasingly more difficult to manage an environment and ask the needed open ended prompting questions that are essential in a play based classroom when there are 5-7 extra students in the room. Also, with the reduction of teacher support staff over the years (due to budgetary limitations), there was no longer the ability to have that extra set of hands to help foster the academic and social skill needs of the students. Elizabeth commented,
I found that every time I try to do play-based activities in a classroom of 21 children, 22 children with no aide, it's very, very difficult to be able to manage that and be working with a small group. It's been a struggle to find a way that works. I found that partnering and spreading the kids out in the room helps with management and noise level and that accountability piece helps as well.

Combinations of creativity and reflection were called upon to translate play into an experience that could provide mastery of skills. Planning for a play based learning environment goes well beyond the surface of a teacher's manual. Experiences that are created for students involves an orchestration of materials, student groupings, and questioning strategies to construct the most developmentally appropriate environment students need to acquire the vital academic and social skills.

When it comes to behavior management, students must have clear expectations set and know what the parameters are. The management of the interactions and dialogue that takes place ultimately determines the effectiveness of a lesson. Students enter kindergarten with varied skill sets on how to effectively communicate and collaborate with peers and it's the kindergarten teacher's responsibility to nurture those budding skills so that students can learn with and from their peers.

According to Education Week Magazine (2004), professional development refers to ongoing learning opportunities available to teachers and other education personnel through their schools and districts. Professional development opportunities should be used to support teachers in building well managed play-based classroom environments. Teachers needed understanding in lesson plan development to be able to determine all the factors involved in creating a play
based model of learning. A school system that encourages and supports play based teaching methods needed to address the importance of behavior, time management and overall planning it takes to successfully implement the play based learning model.

The variables that are beyond a classroom teacher’s capabilities to control pose an additional challenge for teachers. Through many of the conversations, frustration was expressed for not being able to fully implement a successful play based teaching and learning model. The school site is still split between half day and full day kindergarten programs creating an imbalance of the programming that is offered to their students. Building and district administrators understand and appreciate the play based learning model to be the most developmentally appropriate way for kindergarten students to learn. Yet, state and federal mandates and accountability ratings are still driving the decision making. Priority needs to be given to professional development offerings targeted at play based teaching and learning techniques. The district needs to prioritize a consistent programming model for all students that includes manageable teacher to student ratios. Elizabeth summed up these uncontrollable variables by stating “Especially as a person who’s studied child development, I understand it but also I have to say that the pressure to meet the standard, the pressure to use the given curriculum, the pressure to get it all done in the time allotted and the lack of support and the big class sizes is very frustrating.”

Summary

The goal of this study was to examine the experience of teachers in full and half-day kindergarten programs in regards to instruction and play.
In this small school setting, play based teaching and learning methods were known and implemented at varying degrees. The significance of play in a child’s learning was undeniable. Although the structure and consistency of play based methods differed from one classroom to the next, play was distinguished as an important and necessary part of a student’s cognitive and social development.

How the teacher plans for and carries out instructional practices greatly impacts student outcomes. From the detailed planning methods, to the classroom management strategies, and the social interactions that are cultivated, the classroom teacher facilitated a learning environment that fostered developmentally appropriate learning to promote growth in the academic and social skills needed for students to be successful. Literacy and language skill development came from playful tasks such as making menus for a restaurant. Skills were reinforced from counting while playing cards or using magnetic letters to spell some newly learned words. These skills were fostered through play in an environment that promoted the manipulation of materials and conversation amongst peers. As Scoop stated, “students thrive on being able to teach a friend what they already know.”

The theme that was continuously addressed was the challenges of effectively implementing play based learning. Although this was only one of the four themes that emerged from the interviews, it was reiterated throughout all themes. The research question focused on the experiences of kindergarten teachers in play methods and practices that best develop student academic and social skills, however, the conversation was continuously diverted to the factors that hindered these practitioners from full implementation. Regardless of the challenges, play based learning was identified as the most effective method and practice for teaching and learning.
kindergarten students. The need for more time, by offering full day kindergarten (as opposed to half day) for all students would allow for more effective play-based instruction. More manageable class numbers and adequate staff to student ratios would allow for more effective behavior management and open ended questioning strategies. The need for quality professional development was essential to ensure that all teachers understand the importance of effective planning and classroom management in a play based classroom.

The student achievement demands of increased standards and high stakes testing had threatened how teaching time is spent in the classroom. Although play-based teaching and learning is the most developmentally and effective way for kindergarten students to learn, teaching methods and practices are altered to create learning experiences that mirror professional development offerings and practices that teachers are obligated to provide. Such activities are not directed toward the essential elements of a play-based classroom as recognized by teachers. As a result, play-based teaching and learning appeared to be more of a luxury that couldn't be afforded to students. By giving these practitioners a voice, one had to realize that those closes to the classroom directly working with students that are closest to the situation are not able to provide what they believed to be the most developmentally appropriate learning experiences all day, every day. As such the challenges of external compliances and mandates hindered the implementation.

The restriction of time was recognized as a challenge to the ability to address multiple content areas. Scoop commented “an hour and a half of reading, a half hour of math and feeling rushed to get them all in. The demand of trying to fit everything in was also an area of frustration. Elizabeth commented that “when you look at the Common Core, you look at the
scope and sequence and you look at all these things that you have to accomplish with a five-year-old. Elizabeth also spoke about the lack of support (one teacher in a classroom of 20-21 students) to effectively manage the multiple settings in the classroom knowing students were working on varied levels. Most referenced the pressure as academic demands have grown in kindergarten. Even beyond kindergarten, Elizabeth acknowledged that pressure as well. With the amount of initiatives that get rolled out each year increasing already existing demands. Due to changes in school climate and accountability there was already less play-based teaching and learning as compared to 10 years ago.

There is definitive meaning and value in the developmental appropriateness of play based learning in kindergarten. The expressed understanding for and excitement about utilizing a play-based approach to teaching and learning was evident. With the teacher serving as the facilitator, they can hear the dialogue, see the interactions, and observe the students in real life conversations about what they are learning. Teachers have flexibility to use play based learning in a variety of groupings from whole group to individual. By using a variety of materials, students use their imaginations to recreate real world scenarios to enhance their math and language skills. Whether it is a structured or unstructured setting students constantly communicate with classmates and form meaning from their interactions. There were strong sentiments about the benefits of play based learning in kindergarten. Although it required a higher level of professional development in planning and behavior management than traditional teaching requires, it supersedes all other teaching and learning practices in kindergarten, as Luanne stated the best way, our best practice, to help students acquire the needed social and academic skills.
The next chapter will include a discussion of the themes with respect to the theoretical framework of Lev Vygotsky’s constructivist learning theory, a review of the literature and research question as well as interpretations and implications of these findings will be discussed in terms of the applications and future research.
Chapter 5: Discussions, Implications, and Conclusions

Introduction to the Problem of Practice

This chapter reviews the problem of practice through an intrinsic case study emphasizing the research question: How do teachers who have taught both full and half-day kindergarten programs experience play based teaching methods and instruction practices in the development of student academic and social skills? Understanding the history of kindergarten and how play based methods were embedded in the pedagogical practice of kindergarten from its inception was key to developing the context of this study. In addition, examining the role and work of Kindergarten teachers in the present was necessary.

The significance of differences in kindergarten practice will offer insight into how professional practice may be shaped now and in the future. Finally, the research will reflect on how this study has enhanced perspective toward implementation strategies for public schools.

The significance of this problem has implications on local, state, national, and international levels. At the local level there is limited availability for all students to access full day kindergarten. Yet all students and schools are accountable for the same level of achievement regardless of the amount of time provided for kindergarten instruction. This presents an equity issue. On a local level school districts are balancing the demand for full day programs with the availability of space and funding to support them due to a lack of state funding. With societal demands for full-day kindergarten and the federal demand to hold public schools accountable for
student progress, there is disconnect in what teachers believe to be the most effective and developmentally appropriate way to teach and learn in kindergarten and how teaching and learning is currently being conducted. At the national level, it remains essential for our students to compete successfully with their global neighbors.

This study investigated the heart and passions of kindergarten teachers who have experienced both full and half-day programs by giving them a voice to capture their insight and experiences. To do so, a qualitative intrinsic case study was used to examine play based instruction. The study was informed by the constructivism learning theory, which examined how students produce knowledge and form meaning based upon their experiences.

This study chose a purposeful selection of one site and teachers who have taught both full and half-day kindergarten at this site. Selection of participants was done on a volunteer basis. Four participants came forward and volunteered to be interviewed and have their classrooms observed. Data was collected through one on one interviews, classroom observations, and through a collection of artifacts. The data was carefully coded and condensed to identify meaningful themes and understand the relationship between play based methods and practices that a teacher experiences and the social and academic development of their kindergarten students.

**Theoretical Framework**

The Constructivist Learning Theory served as the foundation of this research. The Constructivist Learning Theory centers on the instructional methods and practices that impact the learning experiences of children.
Seminal theorists Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky’s works were chosen as they strongly influenced the Constructivist Learning Theory. Piaget saw play as a major component in a child's learning. Vygotsky acknowledged that what a child learns should be matched to their developmental level. Although the structure and consistency of play based methods may differ from one classroom to the next, like Vygotsky and Piaget, all the teachers in the study saw play as an important and necessary part of a student’s cognitive and social development. Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development describes how learners should be challenged within close proximity to, yet slightly above, their current level of development. This allows for students to continuously increase their knowledge while still maintaining their confidence and motivation at a pace that they define. Without the essential components of a play based learning classroom, with a teacher facilitator, in a classroom that is well managed as a safe and supportive environment, students wouldn’t be able to increase their current development abilities.

Themes Associated with the Theoretical Framework

All participants in this study were kindergarten teachers of the same elementary school. Through an analysis of focused interviews, classroom observations, and a review of artifacts, common themes of play-based experiences emerged.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THEME</th>
<th>THEORY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teachers in this study advocate for play based learning as the most developmentally appropriate way for students to learn essential academic and social skills</td>
<td>• Play is a major component in a child’s learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Children cognitively develop through play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• All children develop and learn differently so they require different</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How the teacher plans for and carries out instructional practices greatly impacts student outcomes. From the detailed planning methods, to the classroom management strategies, and the social interactions that are cultivated, the classroom teacher facilitated a learning environment that fostered developmentally appropriate learning to promote growth in the academic and social skills needed for students to be successful.

Play positively impacted learning that would otherwise be difficult to measure. Students could show what they knew and apply it to their play interactions to increase their knowledge and understanding.

- Teachers need to understand a child’s Zone of Proximal Development to be able to know a child’s actual level and support opportunities slightly above that level
- The role of the teacher should be a facilitator of the learning
- Individuals produce knowledge and form meaning based on experiences

In the Constructivist Learning Theory the role of the teacher is paramount. The underlying concept within this theory is that individuals (students in this case) produce knowledge and form meaning based upon their experiences. Teachers in this theory function as facilitators, whose role is to provide learning experiences where students can explore, create, and question their peers to form their own meaning and understanding. The typical teaching roles of directing, questioning, and reflecting become a shared responsibility of the teacher and students. As the facilitator, the classroom teacher supports the students through these phases so that they can gain the confidence and independence needed to be able to support their own learning. In a traditional classroom setting you may often find a teacher telling instead of asking. Instead of answering questions that only align with their curriculum, the facilitator in this case must make it so that the student comes to the conclusions on their own instead of being told. The teacher
should be serving as a mentor supporting the interactions and a consultant by helping the children reflect on the experiences. All teachers in this study demonstrated their understanding of the teacher serving the role as the facilitator and the positive impact that has on making students critical thinkers.

Teachers foster a classroom climate that is respectful and motivational. The supportive and respectful classroom environment that the teachers spoke of is crucial for students to feel safe and supported in their learning. Students are more apt to take risks and accept challenges. Once experiencing success on a challenging task students gain confidence and are motivated to take on more complex tasks.

**Themes Related to Literature**

Numerous studies have been conducted on the comparisons of full and half day kindergarten. In a society of academic accountability and high stakes testing combined with ever changing family dynamics of single parent families or dual employed parents, the push for full day kindergarten appeared to be the obvious answer to addressing all those needs. The research supported full day kindergarten with twice as much time dedicated to academics, increased achievement scores in the lower grades, fewer grade retentions, and teachers feeling less rushed in their instruction. A full day program also allowed for more social settings throughout a student’s day with the addition of lunch, recess, and specials.

Additional time in a full-day setting is an obvious measure. A longer day inevitably leads to more time to spend on academics and social skill development. However, what all of the studies reviewed failed to address was the experiences of the teacher in the academic and social
skill development of those kindergarten settings. This study acknowledged the classroom teacher as the direct link between the students and the academic and social skill development of those students. Although time is a critical element it’s equally important to understand how that time is best spent. The work of Frederick Frobel, founder of kindergarten and Piaget and Vygotsky, theorists for the Constructivist Learning Theory, all had great impact on the purpose of kindergarten and the teacher’s role in supporting a student to reach their fullest potential. The method of play based instruction that the teachers so passionately spoke about in this study was at the forefront of the very first kindergarten programs developed.

The teachers in this study still share the same believes and practices from almost 180 years ago. It’s the combination of former research that addressed the origins of kindergarten and the teachers’ roles within it (origin of kindergarten and a teacher’s role) to current research directed toward instructional time and how it was used, that led to the need for a study that incorporated the historical development of kindergarten with modern day demands. By focusing on a teacher’s lived experiences it was possible to best understand how a student develops the needed academic and social skills to be successful in kindergarten and beyond.

Seeking the teacher perspective appears to be so obvious yet was extremely difficult to find in the research. In much of the literature it appeared to be implied that a teacher would automatically know how to use teaching time effectively once given the opportunity to teach a longer day. The aspects of learning through play that teachers in this study perceived as the essence of kindergarten has been supported in all the research that was examined. As The findings of this study clearly acknowledged each teacher’s understanding of the importance of
play based instruction as being the most developmentally appropriate and effective way to teach academic and social skills to kindergarten students, it is essential to align what they know to be best practices and what they do on the daily basis. This represents a need for professional practice as well as future research.

In previous research conducted it has been made evident that kindergarten has evolved over the century. It has transformed from student centered exploration to teacher centered skill driven and most currently a combination of the two. The structure of the day has been adequately examined from a half day experience to a full day experience and how the time is best utilized. The balance of academic and social skill development in kindergarten has also been extensively examined in the research. Even the role of the teacher as a facilitator versus a lecturer is well documented. All of these topics are extremely important and crucial in understanding the complex dynamics of effective kindergarten programming. What has been lacking is the teacher's experiences on how all these factors play out in the classroom on a daily basis. It is important to have the research on the importance of time, play based learning and teacher facilitators but what does that look like through the lived experiences of a teacher? This study confirms previous research and then takes it one step further by tapping into the minds and classrooms of those that are entrenched in the work every day.

This study confirmed the theories of Froebel, Vygotsky, and Piaget supported the research that has been conducted based on their theories. This study improved previous studies by adding the layer of teacher perceptions and experiences to support the literature.
Implications of Findings for Practice

This study has implications for the expansion of play based kindergarten programing and the inclusion of teacher input in the development of best practices. This study provided insight into advocacy for play based learning, teacher impact, student learning outcomes, and system challenges of kindergarten programming. Because the literature is limited, this study provided the opportunity for researchers, educators, and administrators to better understand the potential impact kindergarten teachers have on student academic and social success in the current context of school reform. Students will directly benefit from a kindergarten model that is developmentally appropriate and one that engulfs them in social and academic skill development that is hands on, engaging, and motivating. Success rates in kindergarten with this model of teaching and learning will lead to greater academic gains regardless of whether students are in a full or half day kindergarten setting.

As a result of hearing kindergarten teachers’ voices, we have clear messages directed toward program examination and professional development. This study provided an opportunity to see how teacher input can positively impact effective programming. Results of this study can be used to re-assess and evaluate current kindergarten programing.

To guide the inquiry, assessment could include data analysis of formative and summative assessments, referrals to guidance and administration for social and behavioral supports, and educator evaluation on the usage of best practices. The school in this study could use themes and findings documented in this research to identify what programs are working and perhaps what programs are missing or have gone by the wayside. Results of this study can also be applied to
state mandated change or other factors that could significantly affect the pre-existing programming. All of the previous implications could also be applied to other kindergarten programs in neighboring towns. These recommendations are not finite.

**Implications of Findings for Future Research**

There is a need for further research to build on the findings of this study. Areas for future research include:

- The need for strong behavior management and professional development for play based to be successful
- How external decisions making beyond the classroom impacts the effectiveness of a play based kindergarten program
- Studying the experiences of kindergarten teachers in other schools. By repeating the study it may produce similar results, which would strengthen and further validate the study’s transferability (Creswell, 2007). By being able to compare the data of two like sites could strengthen the findings for more play based learning in kindergarten and the need to provide staff with professional development in the area of play based planning and teaching. It could also provide additional considerations for enhancing play based methods and practices in kindergarten.
- Research that incorporates other sources of data such as parent perceptions around play based instruction and student outcomes, educator evaluation results around play based practices, and administrator perceptions on the impact and effectiveness of play based teaching and learning. By including the perspective of additional stakeholders it could
further validate the findings and/or provide additional areas of consideration in order to strengthen the overall program.

- Research focused on leadership changes in the school specifically around kindergarten schedules, professional development, and an emphasis on play based learning, and how those changes have an impact on the kindergarten programming. The teacher perspective is rich in data and needs to be valued in decision making. However, it would irresponsible not to acknowledge the vision of the building leadership and their influence on the programming.

- Comparing teacher experiences of play based practices across grade levels. With all the data collected in this study it's important to utilize what was learned when looking at the programming students will transition into next. Consistency in programming provides for seamless transition.

**Limitations of the Findings**

The uncontrolled variables that influenced the results of this study were minimal. There were only four participants in the study. Because the number of participants was small it led to a smaller amount of data to be able to compare. Because of the small sample size and qualitative nature of the study, the findings are not generalizable to other settings. The findings should not be generalized to all kindergarten settings.
Personal Thoughts and Beliefs

As a former elementary teacher I have great respect for the work of a kindergarten teacher. They have a profound influence on the educational foundation that is built for students. A student’s growth and development is fostered by the methods and strategies that a teacher employs. I, personally, recognize the importance of a teacher’s voice and want to support them in having the greatest impact on their students. Now, as an administrator, I can influence the professional development and building level structures to better support the role of the teachers so that they can be better equipped to deliver the methods and strategies that best support students’ needs. I believe play based kindergarten programs are the most developmentally appropriate programs for kindergarten students to acquire the needed social and academic skills for life-long learning success.

Concluding Remarks

The goal of this study was to conduct a case study of an elementary school in a small southeastern town in Massachusetts that has been offering both full and half day kindergarten for the past 10 years. This case study was designed to expose the perceptions of four kindergarten teachers with regards to play based teaching and learning in kindergarten. The research and data analysis revealed themes of the benefits and challenges associated with play based teaching and student learning in a kindergarten classroom and the impact those perceptions have on the overall success of students. The study focused on kindergarten teachers who have experienced teaching in both full and half day kindergarten settings. Having experience in both full and half day kindergarten enhanced the quality of their contributions. Taking the time to sit and talk with
these teachers who have over fifty years of teaching experience combined was invaluable. The knowledge and passion they have for teaching compelled me to act on their thoughts and ideas. Their remarks provided data that is now driving the decision making about the future kindergarten programming and professional development offerings in this setting. The teachers in this study are now key contributors to designing the play based kindergarten programming, identifying the needed professional development for staff, and the spokeswomen to the stakeholders within the school community about this model.

The results of the case study data analysis revealed key characteristics and programmatic components that lead to meaningful and successful kindergarten experiences. Using these results, the researcher fulfilled the goal of sharing best practices of teaching and learning in a play based kindergarten classroom and now the school district is putting forward a proposal at the annual town meeting for the town to support free full day kindergarten for all students. The data analysis was also able to determine systems of challenge that the school of study can use for future considerations. An Early Childhood Enhancement Committee has been developed to examine the challenges and propose recommendations to address the challenges through a multi-year plan.

Additionally, this research has provided information for district and building level administration to utilize for improving the teaching and learning for all kindergarten students. As the Assistant Superintendent in the school district I oversee curriculum, instruction, assessment, and professional development. Now as a scholar-practitioner, I can be a change agent in the district for kindergarten programming that is a model of excellence. The research,
theories, and data have added value to my practice and has empowered me to influence the thinking and actions of the people who can make play based kindergarten a reality in this school district.
References


Opinion Dynamics Early Education Parent Survey of 2006


Appendix 1

Northeastern University College of Professional Studies, Education Department

Project Title: Teacher Experiences on Play Based Methods and Instructional Practices used in Half & Full-Day Kindergarten

Principal Investigator: Nancy Young, Northeastern University Faculty

Student Researcher: Gina E. Williams

Interview Questions

Focus Question: Now that you have experienced teaching full-day and half-day kindergarten, how do you perceive the experiences of play based methods and instructional practices used in full & half-day kindergarten?

Background Information (have practitioners come with this information)

1. What is your name?
2. How many years have you been teaching?
3. What grades have you taught?
4. How many years have you taught kindergarten (half day and full day)?

Play Based Methods

Round 1

1. What does play based teaching mean to you?
2. Where did you learn about teaching through play?
3. Tell me about the types of play you provide in your classroom and why.
4. What do you think children can learn academically and socially from play?

5. Can you describe your role in play based learning?

6. What are the difficulties in using a play-based approach?

7. How could we educate stakeholders about the importance of play based methods in kindergarten?

8. Is there anything that we haven’t discussed that you think is important about play based methods and practices in full-day vs. half-day kindergarten as they relate to academic and social skill development?

Round 2

9. What percentage of the day is focused on play-based learning?

10. What percentage of play-based learning is structured vs. unstructured?

11. Describe when play is used for social skill development vs. academic skill development?

12. When are play based methods most effective; when introducing, reinforcing, or extending learning?

13. What is the evidence to show that students are making meaning from their play experiences?

14. What prerequisite skills do students need in order to be successful in a play based learning environment?

15. As a teacher how do you foster/build those needed skills?
16. From a planning prospective, what do you need to account for and how is that different from traditional planning?

17. In your first interview you talked about your role in play based practices and talked about questioning as a strategy. What are some of the types of questions do you ask students while they are playing?

18. Why do you feel questioning is an important strategy in play based learning?

19. How do the student responses inform you?

20. Anything else you would like to share about play based methods as it relates to the classroom climate, your role, and the success of students academically and socially?
Appendix 2

Professional Development Offerings for the 2015-2016 School Year
_______________ Elementary School
__________________, MA

Table 2

Professional Development offerings for the 2015-2016 school year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Curriculum</th>
<th>Social/Emotional</th>
<th>Technology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum Alignment</td>
<td>Executive Functioning</td>
<td>Google Classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handwriting Without Tears</td>
<td>Mental Health Issues</td>
<td>Google Drive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading with TLC</td>
<td>Safe and Supportive Schools</td>
<td>Google Forms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Next Generation Science</td>
<td>Pragmatics and Emotional Development</td>
<td>Smartboard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowering Writers</td>
<td>Communicating with Parents on Mental Health Issues</td>
<td>Technology in an Early Childhood Setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAP (Measures of Academic Progress)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Website Design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading Street Series</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>