ARE YOU READY FOR SCHOOL? SUPPORTING BRIDGES TO KINDERGARTEN

A thesis presented
by
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to
The School of Education

In partial fulfillment for the requirement of the degree
Doctor of Education

in the field of
Education

College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts

November 2017
Abstract

This study was designed to investigate the experiences of public magnet school prekindergarten teachers’ experiences in preparing transitioning prekindergarten children to kindergarten. Research shows that preparing young children in prekindergarten for a successful transition to kindergarten is the foundation to children’s success. Yet, more and more, prekindergarten teachers are abandoning appropriate instructional strategies due to increased academic demands and systemic barriers placed on administrators and teachers, affecting a child’s readiness to transition from prekindergarten to kindergarten (NCLB, 2002; Kagan, 1990; Lynch, 2015; Baron et al. 2016). Supporting teachers in employing appropriate instructional strategies supports the very social and emotional competence of a child needed to support future attention to cognitive demands (Sutton-Smith, 1999; Suomi & Harlow, 1971; Hughes, 2002; Brown, 1969; Whitehead, 2010). While the literature is rich in early childhood development (Vygotsky & Kozulin, 2011; Vygotsky, Reiber & Carton, 1987-1999; Bruner, 1985), transitioning from school readiness programs (Wilson & Farran, 2010) to the kindergarten through twelfth grade system and, the importance of employing play in the classroom (Paley, 2004; Piaget, 1998; Parten, 1932), it also reveals there is a decline in play in the prekindergarten classroom to the detriment of young children's development, growth and learning. The primary significance of this study is that it sheds light on relevant and meaningful perspectives on the experiences of how prekindergarten teachers prepare transitioning prekindergarten children for kindergarten. These perspectives can be used to examine how early childhood teachers, administrators and families can support transition and school readiness for public magnet school prekindergarten children going into kindergarten.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education, transition, play, magnet schools, school readiness
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is not possible to thank each of those before me and on whose shoulders I stand. But, the squarest of shoulders that led me to understand intellectual curiosity are those of Ms. Crandall. To you, Ms. Crandall, I finally answer your unending query that started with, “You might remember there was a time when it was not like it is today, do you remember? And, can you find the goodness of those times and the goodness of these times? And, can you make the change that should be made to keep the goodness in the world?” I can finally answer that question. I would answer that the truth of those and these times is much too complicated to accept anything of myself and others that is more than an approximation of what lies deep in one’s heart and deep in one’s experience. But, with this knowledge I hope to create a space for young children and their families to find joy, happiness and knowledge in their lives.

I cannot even begin to thank my fellow doctoral students, Jessica and Cathy, on whom I depended to take the next steps and to sit until I wrote! To my friends and work mates, thanks for sticking around even after saying, “no” to every weekend event! My colleagues that stood by me, encouraged me to take this step. Gayle, Katie and Mark, and Abby I am forever grateful. And, to Jenna your time is here. I couldn’t have done this without you.

To my parents who consistently cheered me on to the next step and made me coffee in the early mornings at the dining room table at 6:00 am because 11:59 pm comes quickly when an assignment is due.

To my husband who made sure our family resources were dedicated to achieving this work. As folks were commenting that earning a doctorate just in time to retire seems pointless, you reminded me that the curiosity of the learner never retires and that one does not cease to think and engage in life.
To my children who helped me figure out more technology than I care to admit!

Madelaine, Margaret and James, you will be forever my inspiration for wanting to study education. I fear and have hope in your courage to stand on the shoulders of those before you to create a better future through knowledge and curiosity.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Preparing young children in prekindergarten for a successful transition to the kindergarten to grade twelve experience is foundational to children’s success. Yet, prekindergarten teachers are abandoning appropriate instructional strategies more and more due to increased academic demands and systemic barriers placed on administrators and teachers (NCLB, 2002; Kagan, 1990; Lynch, 2015) affecting a child’s readiness to transition from prekindergarten to kindergarten. The question arises as to what other choice they have. Contributing issues as to why teachers use less and less play in the classroom despite the research are complex (Lynch, 2015; Baron et al. 2016). Nonetheless, supporting teachers in employing appropriate instructional strategies supports the very social and emotional competence of a child needed to support future attention to cognitive demands (Sutton-Smith, 1999; Suomi & Harlow, 1971; Hughes, 2002; Brown, 1969).

While the research describes appropriate instructional strategies, such as play, as a widely-accepted approach for teaching young children necessary skills and developing their abilities and as a way to understand experiences in life, the complexities of applying these strategies in practice has many early childhood public school teachers retreat from using (Kagan, 1990). These attitudinal, structural and functional barriers, such as increased academic demands, can cause stress in how prekindergarten teachers choose to instruct young children (Kagan, 1990; Bedrova and Leong 2008; Goldhaber, 1994).

Is there a way to reduce the pressure on both colleagues and the system through a mechanism that can translate or align what the prekindergarten teacher knows about the importance of appropriate instructional strategies to what the larger formal kindergarten to
twelfth grade system requires to meet the increased demands of academics? Were there such a mechanism, it would have to address the important component of child development. The learning child of three to four years old is very different from the five and six-year-old learner. As such, the strategies used for one age group would be different from the strategies for another group of children. How prekindergarten teachers prepare young children to be ready for the kindergarten experience is important to kindergarten through twelfth grade success in school (Blair & Razza, 2007; Chazen-Cohen and Kisker, 2013; Dice & Schwanenflugal, DeVries, 1984; Erikson, 1950; Fraiberg, 1975; California Department of Education, 2000).

The early years for young children are laden with developmental changes, for typically and atypically developing children alike. Whether a child is one with special needs or typically developing, each and every child is developing at their own pace and in a developmental sequence (Piaget, 1975; Erikson, 1985; Gutek, 2004). One activity that allows the individual child to advance their development and learning to the best of their ability with families, teacher and peers, whether the child has a special need or not, is play (Bruner, 1975; Piaget, 1975; Vygotsky, 1967; Paley, 2002). The research shows children with a special need can demonstrate advanced skills through play, thereby increasing the interaction between child and teacher and child and child. Assessment of a child’s abilities is attainable and therefore a more accurate instructional design can be developed and implemented (Frost et al, 2008). Appropriate instructional strategies for all young children in prekindergarten (of all abilities and needs) is fundamentally individualized. This strikes at the core of why it is imperative we support our teachers in using appropriate instructional strategies for our youngest learners.

Research shows the importance of play in the early years in brain architecture, leading to a child’s ability to learn, to understand behavior and overall health. (Center for the Developing
Children can spend hours in play learning how to self-regulate, increasing language and learning about the world. Many benefits are conferred to a child’s learning and development when play is included in the curriculum, but many prekindergarten teachers are not including it during the child’s school day. While the benefits of appropriate instructional strategies are known in the field of education, many prekindergarten teachers do not include play to the extent they know to be useful for children’s learning and development. We must build an effective mechanism to bridge the support for growing and developing early learners.

**Topic**

A young child’s development in all progressive domains from the ages of three to five leap from stage to stage rapidly during a time when our youngest learners spend up to six hours in, sometimes, passive and still early childhood settings. From 1970 to 2014 there was a 34% increase of 3- and 4-year old children enrolled in full-day preschool (National Center of Education Statistics, 2014, table 202.1). The ability for teachers to use appropriate teaching strategies is essential to the current growth and development of young children, as well as being, essential for children’s future learning (Valiente et al, 2011). Teachers make the decision about the daily opportunity for engaging strategies and studies show that enhancing physical motor skills and a child’s imagination through play aid in a child’s development (Apache, 2006; Sacha & Russ, 2006). Play has been shown to help young children regulate their responses in a learning setting (Pianta, 2014; Valiente et al, 2011). Even in light of these data, prekindergarten teachers show a decline of play in their practice.

One trend leading to this decline in the early childhood classroom is the increased academic demands placed on schools to meet testing requirements. In spite of teachers knowing the benefits of play will prepare young children to meet these demands, they are becoming more
and more teacher centered and dependent on skill repetition to make children ready for the academic demands of kindergarten (Shepard & Smith, 1988; Gilbert, J. et al., 2011; Lynch, 2015). There is a belief that if students begin earlier learning reading, math and science, children will know more, earlier, and achieve higher test scores. However, studies have shown this is not the case (Suggate, 2012; Marcon, 2009; Giedd, 2000). Using appropriate instructional strategies is key to a child’s early learning; however, research shows there is a fear of employing these strategies with the transitioning prekindergartner because of heightening demands of accountability for closing the achievement gap and attaining higher test scores.

Research Problem

prekindergarten teachers are in a unique position to serve the youngest learners using research-based strategies for instruction to ensure learning. Limited ability to put into practice what teachers know to be good practice decidedly inhibits the education of young children. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of how public prekindergarten teachers prepare prekindergarten children for kindergarten in order to uncover which actions and strategies are used as preparation for kindergarten and the effectiveness on transitioning prekindergarten children.

Justification of the Research Problem

Transitioning prekindergartners experience significant shifts in demands in kindergarten. These demands require a child to adjust quickly to new teachers, peers, routines and academic expectations. How children cope with this adjustment is important to school success (Baron et al., 2016). When prekindergarten teachers are able to prepare transitioning prekindergarten children for kindergarten, the children are more likely to take on the demands of kindergarten.
As a result of increased academic demands placed on administrators and teachers play is employed less and less as an appropriate instructional strategy.

The role of play is well documented in the growth, development and learning for young children. Sociologist Mildred Parten, (1932) documented six stages of play that all children go through teaching them how to interact, cooperate, share and make friends. All of these components are aspects of school readiness that prekindergarten teachers are responsible for creating. Play is widely accepted as a strategy for children to learn and to construct knowledge by themselves and with others (Isenberg & Jolongo, 1993; Klugman & Similansky, 1990, Piaget, 1962; Malaguzzi, 2012; Paley, 2014).

Teachers hope to do what they know is best for young children, yet, many public schools do not view play as, “the primary medium for learning” for young children (Goldhaber, 1994). That point of view can weigh heavily on teachers who know that play is a natural learning tool for young children. Administrators, directors and colleagues in older grades can diminish the confidence of colleagues teaching younger children through their actions and words (Spillane, 2006). In a study conducted by Stipek and Byler (1997) they found that when early childhood teachers were asked about why they chose to be more either, “basic-skills” oriented or “child-centered” oriented, teachers referred to administrative pressures and policies as reasons for not implementing practices that were more consistent with their beliefs (p. 322). Further, Stipek and Byler (1997) found that teachers, “who claimed that their classroom was more academic and structured than they would like referred to other sources of pressure, including administrators’ emphasis on academics and structure, unrealistic expectations, achievement tests and the school or state curriculum” (p. 317). In addition, Lynch (2015), examined teacher’s social media discussions about how they feel about teachers who actively employ play. As an example of her
findings, Lynch reports, “one teacher offered that she believed kindergarten teachers who employ play-based teaching methods are simply being ‘lazy’” (p. 355). Studies have shown that the curriculum for young children in public schools does not allow for planning to use play as a way to learn the academics of prekindergarten and kindergarten. The impact of increased attention to achievement through assessment has overloaded the curriculum with attention to academics. The prekindergarten day is often broken into small blocks of time in which teachers feel compelled to focus on math, science and literacy using strategies for older children. Teachers well versed in child development, as most early childhood teachers are, understand that children benefit from long blocks of uninterrupted time with a balance of alone time and time with classmates. Often, public schools offer even the youngest learner, “specials”, times that add to transitions in and out of the classroom, sometimes several times a day and with new teachers. More often than not, the specials are art, physical education, computers and music (Goldhaber, 1994). The materials are limited and often considered not academic enough in how it looks. In fact, the wonderful real-world tools of play such as pulleys, blocks, scales and other hands on materials have been considered outside of what the larger K-12 system identifies as tools to support strategies for learning. These tools of learning are loud, messy and unconventional in academic circles.

Finally, research about play highlights that it can shape the architecture of the brain (Lester & Russell, 2008). When young children play, there is memory development, language development and self-regulatory skills that begin to develop (Bedrova & Leong, 2005). These are all skills that, when used together, are necessary for learning academics in later grades. As these skills are developing, there is the work of developing a child’s social and emotional
competence that rests in developing an attachment with the teacher (Siraj-Blatchford, 2008).

This study will add to the literature by exploring the experiences of the prekindergarten teacher as they transition prekindergartners to kindergarten. With the increased number of hours in a prekindergarten setting (NCES, 2014, table 210) teachers must be able to employ what they know is appropriate for young children. The decline in play is resulting in decreased movement that children require to coordinate systems. This lack of movement can increase attentional problems and sensory issues (Gaskill & Perry, 2014; Trawick-Smith, 2014). Pushing the curriculum does not allow time in a preschool curriculum for the appropriate instructional strategies that will give each child an opportunity to learn self-regulation, development of fine and large motor skills, or to gain a level of cognitive input through exposure to communication and language (Paley, 2002). In essence, the educational system is denying equal footing in the pursuit of learning. Further, the decline of appropriate strategies robs teachers in prekindergarten and kindergarten the opportunity to understand the approach each child brings to their individualized learning and design instruction. Preschool teachers need support using play to instruct young children, especially given their developmental trajectory. This research aimed to discover actions and strategies of how teachers currently prepare prekindergarten for kindergarten in the early childhood classroom.

**Gaps in the Evidence**

The literature is rich in early childhood development (Vygotsky & Kozulin, 2011; Vygotsky, Reiber & Carton, 1987-1999), transitioning from school readiness programs (Wilson & Farran, 2010) to the kindergarten through twelfth grade system focusing on kindergarten, and the importance of employing play in the classroom (Paley, 2004; Piaget, 1998; Parten, 1932). The
literature reveals that play is on the decline to the detriment of young children's development, growth and learning. However, there is little research about why there is a decline of play in the prekindergarten preschool. One obstruction to the employment of play in the classroom rests in the elevation of importance of testing mandates that encourage teachers and administrators to gear classrooms toward more academic focused teaching strategies. This can confound teachers when they are aware that an effective strategy for instructing young children is play, resulting in using less effective strategies.

This research explored how young children are prepared in prekindergarten looking specifically at how teachers employed play in their preparation of young children in spite of the pressures of testing mandates and the pressure from colleagues and administrators. The research examined at how early childhood teachers can support a smooth transition and school readiness for public magnet school prekindergarten going into kindergarten. Knowing that nearly 50% of transitioning prekindergarten experience challenges in kindergarten and the importance of transition in the success of kindergarten makes this research timely and significant for teachers, administrators and families.

**Audiences**

Contextualizing this study in a public magnet school prekindergarten to kindergarten setting will be useful to state administrators, public school building administrators, curriculum developers, prekindergarten and kindergarten teachers and, families and communities not only as they prepare children for transitioning to join formal schooling, but, as they prepare transitioning children throughout the year. Recognizing the experience of prekindergarten teachers will highlight for the education professional the current gaps in curricular alignment based the learning and developmental needs for the child, creating a space for continuous improvement in
the schools. Additionally, this research will inform professional development systems in both the kindergarten to twelfth grade system and prekindergarten systems when planning to meet the needs of all of their teachers. For communities, this research will provide a way to recognize the unique needs of younger children and their teachers and, create a space for the youngest learners and their teachers to thrive.

**Significance of Research Problem**

It is important to ensure young children enter the kindergarten year ready to learn. How prekindergarten teachers prepare children plays a significant role in giving young children a successful start when joining formal schooling. Prekindergarten teachers must give thought to what will give young children a positive experience in the classroom so they are prepared to make the transition to kindergarten. Teacher’s stories tell us why some teachers choose to use play as a teaching and learning strategy while others do not. The evidence in strong in early childhood programming to support play and teachers leave their programs ready to use play in the early learning classroom (Kagan, 1990; Goldhaber, 1994).

School readiness and transitional periods are foundational to young children's success; having teachers stand strong in developing skills needed to be successful in the academic world is necessary. The educational community owes it to young children and their families to have benefit of the best possible instructional strategy for each child. Prekindergarten teachers may not use play in their classroom because they fear of the opinions of colleagues, administrators and a misinformed community about the benefits of play to a young learner. Some prekindergarten teachers may have to abandon play because of lack of time and materials in their classroom.
Young children in prekindergarten are at an important developmental stage. There is wide agreement that young children are developing in areas of learning, physical, social and emotional domains. Bruner (1985) offers that play which is meaningful and relevant and is experienced with a peer, a nearby teacher and concrete materials that work together to, “provoke combinatorial exploration” learning will occur. Since this is a hefty developmental period, it is crucial that prekindergarten teachers use effective teaching strategies to support our youngest learners (Piaget, 1962; Fraiberg, 1975; Erikson, 1950). Conversely, it is during this year that many prekindergarten teachers withdraw because of their experiences of adversity in employing play in the classroom (Lynch, 2015; Goldhaber, 1994; Breyer et al., 2015). At the same time, administrators and kindergarten colleagues are under pressure to have students prepared to take tests and recite the information they know for assessment purposes. Administrators, kindergarten teachers and families alike begin to feel the pressures of potential failure of student achievement and look at the prekindergarten preparation year to identify what is happening.

Despite literature that highlights strategies and pathways to transition for schools and families, 48% of children transitioning to kindergarten continue to experience some graduated hardship (NCDTL, 2000). When teachers, administrators, and families are aware of what it takes in prekindergarten to prepare children to meet the demands of formal schooling, play is more likely to be supported. Without supporting play, a burden is placed on preschool teachers to reduce play, reduce the variety of activities and ways to learn in favor of skill repetition, and practicing to be “ready” for the kindergarten year of academics (Gilbert, J. et al, 2011). This reduction goes against what many know to be good practice and it is solely practiced to meet pushed down curricular demands. Support for play in the classroom must be in place to scaffold our youngest learner’s knowledge and growth and development.
Positionality Statement

Children should be given the opportunity for every success in early learning settings, especially as they move into the formal schooling years and rely on well-developed areas of growth and development to support future rigorous academic demands. Having taught in schools as both an early childhood teacher and administrator, I am aware that teaching three and four-year-old children is developing all areas of growth and development, including the cognitive domain in order for children to be ready to manage and engage in more formal schooling. Currently however, these efforts are met with frustration and tension. For our youngest learners to have the opportunity for success when they join the formal education system their teachers must be able to employ the strategies that they know are best suited to the children in their class. Collaborating with kindergarten teachers while consistently teaching to all areas of a child’s development is foundational to preparing young children for kindergarten and easing the transition into the formal education system.

My interest in early childhood teachers using a curriculum that supports young children best stems from growing up as a military connected child who understands deeply how the relationship between teachers and children can be one of the most important influences in a young child’s life. If teachers are not working from their highest and best understanding of how young children learn, the relationship can suffer and the learner will be the casualty of the learning and teaching equation.

As a child, I experienced many schools across the United States and across the world and there are many assumptions about young children in learning settings. I find that most assumptions that determine how children learn best have been made without looking deeply at what the teachers themselves are experiencing. It is my hope that this research will unlock
teachers’ experiences and inform others how we can advance a child’s experience successfully as they transition from prekindergarten to kindergarten.

As an early childhood educator for over thirty years, as a classroom teacher, an early interventionist, a consultant to early childhood educators, an administrator, and as a parent to three children and my own early learning experiences, I have an inside perspective on how young children learn and how my colleagues understood how young children learn. Awareness of these experiences, engaging in reflection and understanding the reflexive nature of qualitative research questioning and re-questioning during the process assisted in bringing my biases to the surface.

Engaging in reflective processes will aide in the interpretation of data of this study. Should the data indicate that there is no importance in exploring the experiences of prekindergarten teachers in how they prepare prekindergarten children for kindergarten, I will turn to the study paradigm, framework, methods, data and experience to understand what themes have surfaced that offer a contribution to our field of education. It is my intention to bring a level of self-awareness that not only accepts the stories of the research participants, but also, manages my own professional and personal biases that could interfere with this research, data gathering and data results.

**Background experiences**

What prompts memories of my early childhood school experiences is reading over report cards that my nursery school teacher sent home. Being graded in terms of ABC’s and 123’s brings fewer memories to mind than reading my teacher’s thoughts in the comments section of my report cards. Comments such as, “Cathy likes to talk with her friends a lot” and, “Cathy sits still when needed” along with, “I have liked having Cathy in my class” makes me remember my
nursery school days much more clearly than the check marks under the columns of “knows ABC’s” and “knows numbers 1-5”. I have asked my mother what my nursery school was like. From her description, I understand what it was like by way of what she had hoped it would be; time for me to meet other children and for her to meet other families. She reminded me that my nursery school teacher was at least in her 40’s and it was difficult for my teacher to get around. Playing in my nursery school is not what I remember, but rather, sitting and coloring in color books, being read to by the teacher, snacking and more coloring.

The one experience, however, that continues to throw shadows in my early learning experiences is one that demonstrates to me the power of an early childhood educator. In my nursery school experience, mostly anticipated by separations from my mother through daily arrivals and departures, curiosity about the other children and wanting to please the teacher, it was wanting to please the teacher that is most striking. I clearly remember being the child responsible for my nursery school teacher’s shin injury; at least through the eyes of a four-year-old. Kneeling on the bench of the picnic tables that served as our work-spaces, my skinny shins and long feet hung out and over the bench into the aisle while playing with a friend, my nursery school teacher was walking with her hands behind her back, through the aisles and past our table. In trying to avoid my legs that were sticking out into the aisle, she bumped into the sharp edge of the picnic table. She yelped, began to cry and sat down on one chair while elevating her maimed leg on the other chair, watching me intently throughout the day and letting us know she could no longer walk. From my perspective, I was never going to be able to make it up to my teacher. I often wonder how she felt about that afternoon, in the chair injured at the hands of a four-year-old child. How did she feel about having all of us in the classroom? Did she like the idea of
picnic tables as a way to have us arranged in the classroom to color or to learn our letters? What was her experience of teaching young children, how did she experience teaching us?

While it would have been difficult to understand at four years old what a teacher might have been going through, I believe that if she were able to truly understand the learner, we might have been in a classroom with seating and play spaces that were more conducive to how a child learns. While this experience took place in Mayport, Florida, the prekindergarten classroom in Greensboro, North Carolina was similar. The environments were very teacher focused with few, if any, play spaces in the classroom. Many additional factors play into my early school experiences, such as the separations from my family at drop off. Even today, I experience butterflies in my stomach each time I see a yellow school bus.

After thirty years in the field of early education, I continue to wonder if early learning settings were ever thought of as spaces for young children or if they were considered places to babysit children for the day. What were and what are the thoughts and experiences of teachers in early learning settings? For a child to transition into the demands of formal schooling, a system sensitive to the how young children are prepared to transition from prekindergarten to kindergarten, I believe, creates a more learner-centered environment. There is no way I would have known at the time as a young child, but, now as parent and veteran educator I can see that to advance the success of prekindergartners transitioning to kindergarten a better understanding of how prekindergarten teachers prepare young children for kindergarten is important.

Classroom teacher

I earned an undergraduate degree in modern languages and business with the dream of working at the United Nations in New York, New York. During the six months of employment at venture capital firm on Park Avenue, I stepped over a homeless man and found myself blaming
him for his own situation. I felt horrible about that and questioned myself about how I could help rather than find blame. It was within days that I gave notice and found a position in education.

I was hired as a first-grade teacher in a Catholic School in the urban town of Hoboken, New Jersey. All of my students were in desks in rows with two students who could not manage the rigid rules of the classroom. I found them often in the cloakroom, organizing the coats and engaging in hide and seek. They had many challenging behaviors, but, their families were counting on our school managing their behavior as part of the mission and vision of our school.

As a first-year teacher, I implemented what I thought would be appropriate for the two students in my classroom. I created small behavioral rewards for appropriate behavior, but, did not scaffold or differentiate instruction for either of the students. I implemented what I knew from my own learning experience and the ideas from the principal and colleagues. I observed how the other first grade teacher was teaching and was continuing with drills and memorization for children in her class that were exhibiting behavioral difficulties. In my naiveté, I did not even consider that my classroom could have been designed differently and my instructional strategies could have been anchored in a developmental variety of options. I was certain I was doing what was right for each student.

I was finding the year exhausting and wondered if there was a better way to reach each child. I attended professional development sessions, met for supervision more frequently than was required and studied every possible book about elementary school, specifically first grade. Feeling like a failure for two of my students, children, who were extremely bright, but, unable to learn through my method of instruction, I went back to school and took child development classes which led to an early childhood education concentration instead of entering a teacher certification program. This proved to be the crossroads in my career. I began to realize that
human development was part of who we are as learners and that teaching is a gift and a calling, but, if the student is not learning, the teacher is no longer in service of education. I soon moved to teach in a kindergarten classroom.

In this classroom, I began to shift my practice in a way that allowed children more access to the toys they needed. The toys in the classroom were limited, few had all the pieces and many were old. In concert with the first-grade teacher, we wrote a letter home to families requesting they donate toys they were no longer using. My first-grade colleague was not at all interested in toys in her classroom, but was open to collaborating on the project for my kindergarteners. Both of our classrooms became a space for toys that ran the continuum of shiny and new to old and broken. It was a start. The usable toys were placed in our classrooms and used to support the curriculum. For my class the shift allowed for guided play. Looking back, I was clumsy at guiding play for some of the children and better at it with others. With each learned principle in my coursework, I applied a new toy and new guiding language. I learned the importance of supporting peer relationships and began to facilitate children relationships. As my pedagogy shifted to become more child centered and more understanding of a child’s development, challenges arose. I had to let go of total control.

As I became more comfortable in my pedagogy with adding time and toys to support instruction in the classroom, the children become less dependent on me to direct each move. I saw before my very eyes the curiosity come alive in my young learners. Children were truly in the process of learning to regulate themselves and each other. Nevertheless, my classroom that year was extremely noisy and at times I felt out of control. The children literally and figuratively now had a voice in their learning. I continued to have a voice with staff and administration, and still more often than not, theirs was the central voice.
The cost of materials for the classroom increased and I found I was covering that cost more and more and based on the specific learning needs of several of the children in my class. In one month, I easily spent over one hundred dollars to replace batteries, purchase the spindle toy that would assist one student in eye hand coordination and fabric to make curtains for the windows to keep our classroom bright. Of course, over time, I have come to understand that engaging children to do the very things I was doing would be even more effective in supporting their growth and development. There was a cost to shifting my paradigm of how young children learn, but I did not have the courage to ask my principal for reimbursement that would have been a concrete step in making the shift known to others.

The biggest challenge was my own confidence and courage in relaying to my colleagues and principal that while the children in my class were learning to socialize and, regulate their behavior, I was learning about how persistent or not persistent a child was in their approach to figuring out how to problem solve when trying to build a toy barn. I was figuring out which children were quick to understand social cues from my or their peers’ voices and those children who struggled. I did not have the courage to let my colleagues know that some of the children in my class were just learning to identify the combination of letters that spell their names. And, that some of the children in my class are counting, putting written sentences together, helping other children, taking the initiative to ask questions and persist in solving problems. I just knew that if I could persist in planning using play, I could prepare children who were not yet first grade ready over time and through play.

Unfortunately, I was wrong. Play in the kindergarten classroom was not going to be accepted as the primary teaching strategy. I put a great deal of pressure on myself to deliver an academically prepared child to the first grade in spite of knowing that there is a human
development aspect to learning that cannot be forced. There are concepts taught in school that are best learned once a certain level of growth and development has been achieved. My colleagues were happy with the results of the children that mastered their letters and numbers and how to behave in a group. Conversely, they were less satisfied with the children who could not. I accepted blame for children who could not. I look to this research to discover how we can make effective use of the knowledge of how young children learn coupled with how teachers think it best to prepare transitioning prekindergarten children to kindergarten.

**From Coursework to Parenthood**

The birth of my twin daughters and desperately trying to feel good about teaching with hopes of reaching each child threw me deeper into early childhood coursework. I took on the full program and decided to work with younger children in prekindergarten. The college at which I was taking courses had a children’s preschool for three, four and five-year-old children. I worked as a student in the program and as adjunct faculty in the early childhood education program. I served as the student field placement faculty that worked with community childcare programs, both public (Head Start and special education in public schools) and private (Montessori, Reggio Emilia, Waldorf and Child World) and homebased care. I also covered theory and environment classes when professors were not able to be present. I began to see with my children and under the guidance of early childhood professors in a college laboratory children’s school the importance of play in child learning and in teacher instruction. What was crucial, however, was understanding how adults bring what they remember and what they experienced as students to their current teaching. Adults seemed to take that experience and rely on that as a guide for how it should be for young children today, perhaps forgetting that children younger than the adults’ memory are different. It is important to learn and think about the child
before you, not about the memory of how one was educated, nor about what the future child will be like.

Arriving at this understanding was, again, under the guidance of the professors in the Early Childhood Education (ECE) program. In addition to coursework, through reflective writing and supervision, my practice changed over time to become child centered. I tried to bring what I learned home to my two daughters and at three years old, enrolled them in the children’s school on campus. Having spent a great deal of time in the prekindergarten classroom on campus and in centers and homes in communities across Massachusetts, I became a strong proponent of offering to children and teachers a chance to co-create an environment that seeks to explore, inquire and learn about the world around them. I prepared the environment to support inquiry through literacy, numeracy and social interactions. In hindsight, I ask, what about the two students in the years before in my first-grade classroom? Would it be enough to employ play as a teaching strategy? According to experts in human development and in education (Dewey, 1938; Erikson 1950; Piaget, 1962) there are occasions when time is not the great equalizer and interventions beyond what a teacher can do in the course of a school day are needed. I became entrenched in what it meant to educate a child with a special need and began to work with even younger children, infants and toddlers.

**Early Interventionist**

Working with infants and toddlers with special needs through the early intervention system, having young children of my own and years of teaching other families’ young children, distilling what it means to educate young children became very clear. Spending time with families in their homes, participating in activities that support their child and their family in living with a disability, it became clear that learning is individualized and without prior social
and emotional competencies in place that can scaffold the cognitive problem solving of formal education academics, teachers will not reach each and every child.

This work, again, required reflective supervision and guidance from the Executive Director, a Doctor of psychology, and colleagues such as occupational therapists, speech-language pathologists and audiologists, physical therapists, pediatric nurses, nutritionists and fellow teachers, also called developmental therapists. What crystallized during this work and being a parent was that the practitioner had a large part in how a child was taught, guided and encouraged. How the practitioner plans to interact, respond or react, and which activities or strategies are suggested influences how children and their families respond. It was the culmination of this work, that propelled me to the next level of education; working with professionals who work directly with children.

**Consultant**

Affecting change child by child and family by family is an active endeavor. As I grew older, I felt my expertise grew. It was time to give back to the field of education. I began to consult with early childhood programs about curriculum they were using as a way to encourage conversation about how teachers were expected to prepare children for formal schooling. It was never lost on me that to use funds for education there had to be a method to measure the growth of a child’s ability to read, write and use math.

This is difficult for teachers that have large numbers of children in early learning settings. Not every child learns at the same rate or has in place regulatory systems that allow for self and co-regulatory behaviors. In fact, in early learning settings, this is a large part of what encompasses curricula; developing social and emotional competence. As an educational consultant, it was important for me to understand how teachers were preparing children for their
next step in formal schooling. I spent significant time reflecting with prekindergarten teachers about how they teach and how it was working for children in their classrooms. Understanding how education worked as a system was becoming clearer and that the only way to affect change for every child was to examine this from a systems perspective and how each of them work together to support or hinder the learner. In short, how are systems supporting teachers who support learners? How are they thinking, learning and changing?

Administrator

As an experienced administrator in early childhood programs, I moved to the new role as a prekindergarten and kindergarten early childhood public magnet school building administrator. I was eager to give the support needed by early childhood teachers to give children and their families the gift of their knowledge and talents of their practice. I was especially excited to offer this support during a time in a child’s life of robust growth and development and learning that is foundational to experiencing success in the formal kindergarten to twelfth grade school system. Supporting teachers by ensuring a safe school building, adequate coverage for breaks and working with families are important, but instructional support for teachers through curriculum policy, protocol and procedure is a bedrock to positive results in outcomes for children. It was during this administrative experience that all of my professional and parenting experiences aligned and funneled into this research topic. Without the leadership, knowledge and support of teachers collaborating across grades and a lack of curricular structure to anchor in, our early childhood teachers will not be able to employ the necessary teaching strategies needed.

In developing relationships with teachers in our school, it was not long before I understood the challenges our transitioning prekindergartners and early intervention children were experiencing. In all cases, prekindergarten teachers grapple with having children prepared
for the academic demands of kindergarten and some feeling as though that should not be the focus of the work. Kindergarten teachers grapple with trying to understand how some of the children transitioned as underprepared as they are for the academic demands of kindergarten. Were there a curricular structure in place to guide teachers and the child’s learning continuum during this early time in human development, it could not only relieve the tension between colleagues, but also, drive instruction toward positive outcomes for the child.

As a scholar-practitioner, my bias in this research surfaced as believing that a young child’s instruction cannot focus on developing the cognitive domain alone. Further, I hold a bias that play is developmentally appropriate, worthwhile, meaningful and relevant to a person being successful in one’s life and that it is fundamental to how children learn and develop.

**Research Question**

This study seeks to explore the experiences of prekindergarten teachers in a public magnet school. The research question: What is the experience of prekindergarten teachers when preparing prekindergartners for transition into kindergarten in a public magnet school?

**Theoretical Framework**

Anfara and Mertz (2006) describe the theoretical framework as, “any framework or theory [that] allows the researcher to “see” and understand certain aspects of the phenomenon being studied while concealing other aspects” (p. xxvii). The purpose of this research was to understand the experience prekindergarten teachers had in preparing transitioning prekindergarten children. This research will use social learning theory (Bandura, 1975) as the frame to analyze the data and to provide guidance for this research. Further, developmental theory (Bruner, 1985) will support this research in understanding how young children grow, develop and learn.
Social Cognitive Theory

In response to dissatisfaction in behaviorism tenets that did not account for the role of an individual’s cognition in determining intentional actions, Bandura (1977) developed the Social Learning Theory (SLT). Over time, this theory has developed into the Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) (Levin, Culkin & Perrotto, 2001). SCT holds at its foundation that human beings behave because of the interaction among behavioral factors, personal factors and environmental factors. SCT has as part of its theory the concept of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is a recognized psychological construct that is scaffolded to build an understanding of how people’s beliefs in their capabilities influence their environment and control their actions in ways that produce desired outcomes. Since this study grounds itself in exploring how prekindergarten teachers prepare transitioning prekindergarten children in light of possible failure, a psychological stance in this study will assist in understanding that experience. In Social Cognitive Theory, Bandura (Bandura, 1977) offers that behavioral, personal and environmental factors interact to determine motivation and behavior. Specifically, how individuals behave and the strength of their belief in their capacity to overcome failures found in the environment is based on a process of reciprocal determinism; persisting in spite of challenge and possible failure from the environment. Bandura (1977) asserts that human functioning is a result of these factors and from that developed the Triadic Reciprocal Determinism model.
In this triadic model comprised of the environment, behavior and personal factors, the environment and behavior interact with the personal; the personal is composed of the affect, cognitive and biology. The composition of the personal is the foundation for self-efficacy which Bandura (1986) defines as, “people’s beliefs about their capabilities to produce” (p. 310). Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory offers fours possibilities for how teachers might think about their self-efficacy: (a) enactive attainment or mastery experiences – prior success at having accomplished something that is similar to the new behavior, (b) vicarious experiences or modeling – learning by watching someone similar to themselves be successful (c) verbal persuasion – encouragement by others and, (d) somatic and emotional states of physiological arousal – physical and emotional states caused by thinking about undertaking the new behavior (Bandura, 1986, 1997).

To frame this research, this study proposed to use both the verbal persuasion and the mastery experiences to analyze the data from the stories of prekindergarten teachers. Verbal persuasion, as outlined by Bandura (1971), discusses the role of encouragement by others and its importance in the social environment. How prekindergarten teachers experience the verbal
interactions between and among their colleagues, families, principals, district administrators will influence one’s belief in one’s efficacy. As prekindergarten teachers attempt to employ play, they can learn about their capabilities to do so in light of the pressures in the system in which they are working.

The influence of the larger kindergarten through twelfth grade system is the school context or environment in which many preschools operate. Knowing the perceived demands on prekindergarten teachers to make sure that children are ready for kindergarten skills is a part of the reciprocal determinism that the self-efficacy theory supports as a factor. The academic and achievement scores of the larger educational system is an element that teachers consider in their assessment of whether or not they will be successful in teaching young children through play (Goldhaber, 1994). Prekindergarten teachers’ beliefs about their capabilities affect what instructional strategies they choose to employ, how much effort and planning to put into that and whether they will persevere in spite of feedback that play is not preparing transitioning children into kindergarten.

The concept of self-efficacy beliefs introduced by Bandura (as an individual’s assessment of one’s capabilities drives the motivation to act put forth the effort to teach through play and persist even in the face of possible failure. If a teacher does not expect to be successful, using play in the prekindergarten classroom the effort to use play will decline and the use of skill drill and kill will preside; even if when teachers are in possession of strategies that could scaffold the development and knowledge of children through play.

Teachers are influenced by verbal interactions of with administrators of the kindergarten through twelfth grade system, kindergarten teachers, families and community members. In reflecting about their teaching capabilities, teachers make two related judgments: (a) the
requirements of the anticipated task and (b) whether or not they are personally competent (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). Often the teacher evaluation by a kindergarten through twelfth grade administrator will serve to increase or decrease a prekindergarten teacher’s self-efficacy beliefs.

Self-efficacy beliefs are not based on the actual level of competence but rather on one’s perceived level of competence (Bandura, 1994). Bandura (1974) offers that self-efficacy beliefs are context-specific, therefore, this study addressed teachers’ sense of self-efficacy in relationship to the environment in which they work.

**Developmental Theory**

Developmental theory through cognitive perspective lead the researcher to investigate the theories of Bruner, Piaget, Vygotsky and Sutton-Smith. Framing this research was Bruner’s (1985) developmental theory that centers on the educational component of the learning child. Bruner develops the idea that children construct meaning of their experiences based on new ideas or past knowledge and that learning is an active process. Using a repertoire of experiences, the child is able to comprehend and make meaning of the new experiences. Three principles that Bruner (1985) identifies central to his theory focus on instruction. First, instruction must take into consideration experiences and contexts that make a student willing and able to learn; readiness. Second, instruction must be structured in a way such that the student can grasp the instruction easily; spiral organization. Third, instruction must support a student’s ability to fill in the gaps of knowledge; going beyond the information given. These principles are considered as Bruner describes the three stages the learner experiences as they grow and develop.

There are three stages in Bruner’s theory for children from birth to adulthood. During infancy, Bruner asserts the enactive stage, for infants, birth to age one, is a process of
information storage. He believes there is no internal representation of the object or information gained by the infant. As a child moves into the iconic stage from age one to age six, however, moves into a stage that involves the child being able to hold an internal representation of an external object. For this reason, learning is then stored for later use with the next opportunity to engage or build on that learning. The last stage, beginning at age seven, is called the symbolic stage. At this stage, a child can begin to use a symbol or code, such as language to communicate the internal representations. During this stage, the child understands, along with others that each symbol is in relation to something it represents. While Bruner describes each of the stages as distinct and separate, he cautions that any domain of knowledge can be represented through enactive, iconic and-or symbolic representation (Bruner, 1975).

This constructivism type of learning presumes that a child will learn through the process of discovery and in concert with a teacher. It is not information that a teacher gives to a child in an organized manner, yet, facilitates the learning by offering information through instruction that the learner takes and organizes into meaningful and relevant information. For young children, this application of learning through manipulation of materials followed with the opportunity to construct a visual representation may be met through play while addressing the school readiness demands of the getting ready for kindergarten.

Specifically, this study used the icon developmental stage based on the age of prekindergarten children, which is three, four or five years old. As children move through development and gain more experiences, they develop “icons” which demonstrate a significance of meaning. As these “icons” become more anchored in common understanding, there is growth in a child’s mental construct of their experiences.
As children move through prekindergarten to twelfth grade, Bruner applies his theory through a description of the spiral curriculum. Through this curriculum, Bruner explains, “any subject can be taught to any child in some honest form (Bruner, 1985, p. 43). Essentially, Bruner suggests that as child’s thinking becomes more mature, an idea introduced in a simple form and again in a more complex form supports inductive thinking. When students are provided with stimulating situations in which they are active rather than passively listening, they are in “the presence of some optimal level of learning” which seeks to pique a child’s curiosity to resolve uncertainty and ambiguity.

Dale and Bruner *Edgar Dale’s cone of experience overlaid with Bruner’s concepts for instruction.*


**Summary of Theoretical Frameworks**

Both the Social Learning Theory (SLT) and The Developmental Theory (DT) will serve as the theoretical frameworks for this narrative inquiry research and interpreting data gathered from prekindergarten teachers about preparing prekindergartners for kindergarten. It will provide
educators, professional developers and administrators a pathway for supporting teachers in preparing young children for kindergarten that will support our youngest learners.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

This review pulls from a complicated network of overlapping literature that situates itself in education, psychology, child development and play. It was written in the context of our moral imperative as a society to offer every young child access to an optimal learning opportunity during the early years as we continue to uncover the benefits to children who experience high quality preschool. Providing this experience depends on teachers who are supported to instruct through employing the most appropriate teaching strategies. For young children, the opportunity for success lies in employing play which develops cognitive, language and communication, health and physical wellbeing, social and emotional competence in the presence of a dedicated teacher that understands the importance of using strategies that support how young children learn. Supporting teachers to employ these strategies is crucial for giving children access to this opportunity (Bruner, 1985; California Department of Education, 2000; Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Currently, prekindergarten teachers find it difficult to use the tools of play they know are best to prepare children to be school ready and support a smooth transition to kindergarten because of the fear of not meeting curricular demands (Kagan, 1990; Goldhaber, 1994). Abandoning play in the classroom to meet the increased curricular demands (NCLB, 2002) of the kindergarten through twelfth grade school system is leaving children without the necessary tools to attend to later academic readiness skills. Research highlights that young children learn through meaningful play (Crain, 2010). We are rushing young children to kindergarten level skills such as understanding and acting on shared experiences in a group setting and math, science and literacy skills with woefully little time spent on the components of school readiness abilities that support kindergarten skills. The lack of support for prekindergarten teachers to use
play in their classroom leaves teachers isolated reducing their capabilities and agency, thereby reducing positive outcomes for young children (Goldhaber, 1995; Bruner, 1985; Bandura, 1975).

The studies included in this literature review were pulled from research addressing child development, education and brain architecture, the teacher-child relationship and an emphasis on play; systems pressures with including kindergarten to twelfth grade systems expectations and prekindergarten school readiness and transition expectations followed by the literature about curriculum including play.

Woven through this literature review is the research claim that supporting teachers of young children is imperative to preparing prekindergartners for kindergarten. When teachers feel supported, and there is an understanding between colleagues, administrators and the prekindergarten teacher, the child is likely to transition to kindergarten with little challenge, prepared for kindergarten. According to the research conducted by Goldhaber (1995) and Kagan (1990) prekindergarten teachers enter schools ready to support young children by using play in the classroom, but, there are often unsuccessful because of a lack support for this strategy for structural, attitudinal and functional barriers.

The current debate centers on understanding how children learn and how that translates into the type of curriculum that is best for young children. Historic trends in early childhood education is anchored in how Froebel (1877), Dewey (1938) and Piaget (1951) look to support children learning what is most meaningful for children. Early learning classrooms have traditionally included pretend play, blocks, painting and outdoor play. These strategies for learning presuppose a child centered learning curriculum while in older grades it is a more teacher led curriculum (Cutler-MacKenzie et al., 2014). The innovative discussion that Dewey brought to the education discussion in the 1930’s valued every day experiences of the learner. He
offered that experiences should be educative and that it is the work of the teacher to keep up with
the individual learning of each student (Dewey, 1938). Froebel led us to understand that
educators led by the interest of the child will, “arouse the inner want for [the] instruction”
(Froebel, 1887, p. 223). These discussions in school reform asked those in the field to think
deeply about the learner. Employing play, then, in the prekindergarten classroom is a natural
choice of instructional strategy for young children.

For prekindergarten teachers, however, the structure, attitudes and functional barriers of
the system often results in a decline in play in the classroom. The abandonment of play leaves
vacant the development of skills that would undergird the abilities of transitioning kindergarten
children (Sutton-Smith, 2008; Gaskell & Perry, 2014; McLeroy et al., 1988). The idea of sitting
at a table in prekindergarten to practice writing one’s name as the main curricular activity is not
supported by early educators or current early childhood professors (Suggate, 2009, 2012;
Whitebread, 2010). The debate regarding play as a central strategy to support preparedness is
often disregarded, defined as free time versus instructional time in public schools. As is the case
in many communities, there are preschool centers that offer an alternative to public preschool
and seek accreditation that highlights play as essential in the early childhood curriculum.

Many centers outside of publicly funded prekindergarten classrooms seek accreditation
from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) who provide
classroom environments and professional development that indicates play as an important
teaching strategy (NAEYC, 2016). However, as Universal prekindergarten grows as a priority in
the United States, public schools are adopting prekindergarten classrooms and teachers into the
elementary school buildings and teacher accountability systems. In 2013, the United States
served 27% of its three to five-year-old children in part day programs (Child Trends, 2016). With
1,378,146 preschool children enrolled in preschool in 2014-15 school year in state-funded preschool programs and $6,224,478,677 spent (NIEER, 2016), the commitment to all children in early learning settings must be of high quality, not just those settings which reach accreditation and highlight the developmentally appropriate teaching strategy of play. Within all early learning and care settings, supporting teachers to use play as a teaching strategy is important including public magnet school prekindergarten classrooms.

**Methodology**

The methodology used for this literature review was an electronic search of the international and American literature using EBSCO Education Research Guide: JUSTOR, Education Research Complete, PsychING, ERIC, Web of Science, Academic Search Premier and Sage Journals Online databases. The research specific to how prekindergarten teachers prepare children for the transition from prekindergarten to kindergarten is limited. The combination of research about school readiness, school systems, transition, teacher-child learning studies, child development and play offer a strong review. However, it also confirms a need for prekindergarten and larger kindergarten through twelfth grade school systems to create a sustainable change in aligned curriculum and attention to supporting teachers in implementing the change.

**The Developing Child and Early Childhood Education**

It has long been understood that teachers of reading, writing and arithmetic must have a deep understanding of the subject matter to properly instruct students to become proficient in these subjects (National Research Council, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2008). Teaching children during the formal years of kindergarten to twelfth grade has focused on academic knowledge that will serve the student as an active member of society. Over time, as educational reform has come
into view, teachers are expected to take into consideration as a dimension of instruction learners themselves (Diamond, 2010). For young children, who are growing at rapid speed, there are fundamental human development stages in multiple domains that circumscribe the cognitive learning of academic material. As such, there is an emphasis in early childhood education on child development in the social, emotional and physical domains (Eccles & Roeser, 2010; Hammerness, 2006) as a necessary component of understanding the early learner. However, the plethora of stage theory that supports early childhood education from seminal thinkers such as Piaget (1951), Parten (1932), Erikson (1950) can stigmatize children who don’t meet the stages as abnormal or not successful. In addition, these stage theories are based on observations that may be made with deep bias and irrespective of the important and significant experiences in a person’s life. Rejection of these theories can be useful when considering that human growth and development does not take place through abrupt movement from one stage into another, but rather in a gradual manner. While stage theory can serve as a guideline, it is important to have non-stage theorists that allow for a person’s growth and development to be explained at an individual level. Moreover, a non-stage based theory would create high expectations for each child and nurture the construction of individual relationships in the classroom with each individual child (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Being aware of both non-stage based and stage based theory informs understanding how prekindergarten teachers prepare transitioning prekindergarten children. Non-stage based theory allows for as much emphasis on individual ability, diversity in life experience and the uncommon experience as the stage based theory concentrates on the common experience of large groups of people, categories of development and furthering the idea that some are “behind” others.
Close to 30% of the United States’ three, four and five-year-old children are in at least half day preschool care (Child Trends, 2013) making it a crucial that teachers of young children understand their cognitive, physical, social and emotional domains of development (Zimiles, 2000) and how they impact learning. Supporting learners’ in all domains of development will affect their executive functioning (Tools of the Mind, 2007; Diamond, 2010) which will support their ability to attend the cognitive and behavioral demands of later formal schooling. Due to the amount of time spent in care and education during this instrumental developmental period, supporting teachers to execute play in the classroom is crucial to a child’s success in school.

**Impact of understanding brain science in early education.**

Studies of the brain in the context of education has passed through many phases over time. The earliest research pulled from the stress research and the hemispheric isolation studies. In the 1980’s, these areas of research crossed into education and were applied in the classroom (Whitehead, 2010). A decade later, a popular book, *Making Connections: Teaching and the Human brain* (Renate & Caine, 1991) highlighted the hunger for brain science to be applied in the classroom as teachers turned the research from this book into practice. As it is when research is applied quickly without benefit of research, validation commercialization of brain based products appeared on the market. This was known as the brain-based education phase. Currently, this phase is being replaced by the term, “neuroeducation” or Mind, Brain, Education (MBE) which Whitehead (2010) offers, “represents the curricular component of the movement to join neuroscience and education” (p. 53). Since MBE’s lens looks at policy and organizational systems issues, neuroeducation can be used in curricula models with a modicum of assurance that there has been an allowance for the nuances of education. As the decades marched onward
and from this earlier research, scientists approached more carefully the release of research into the educational world.

From this early research and better attention by scientists to change the earlier model of “process of discovery, adoption, misapplication into discovery, adoption, validation” (Diamond, et al., 1964, p. 55) the research supporting the importance of enriched environments and critical periods emerged (Diamond et al., 1964). What Diamond and his fellow researchers discovered was a model that demonstrated that the, “structure of the brain was altered through experience” (p.55). Yet, there was another mis-application, as educators applied this in the classroom by creating environments that were chaotic and cluttered with the good intent of providing enriched experiences.

Whitehead (2010) continues to explain during this same period of better understanding early experiences the idea of critical periods was born. Critical period research highlights the, “capacity for learning at various stages of development’” (p. 56). While this research was misinterpreted for some time, what emerged was the understanding that change in the brain happens well beyond three years old, but, the synaptic plasticity starts in utero (Whitehead, 2010; Shatz, 1994). Essentially, brain development has certain periods of time that a human is more likely to easily learn or understand an experience. While it is believed that ongoing learning will occur across the span of human development, some learning periods are of critical importance during the early years.

Play for young children can assist in developing the brain architecture during these critical periods. Virtually across all cultures, play is part of childhood. (Goncu and Gasking, 2006). Belief that play is beneficial to cognitive, social, emotional and physical development is widespread (Bussey & Perry, 1984; Lovinger, 1974; Sachs, Goldman and Chaille, 1985; Saltz,
Dixon & Johnson, 1977; Piaget, Erikson, Vygotsky, 1977; Whitebread, 2010; Paley, 2016; Mildred Parten, 1932). Whitebread (2010) offers, “Kids learn through playing”. He continues, “It’s essential to their development. They need to learn to persevere, to control attention, to control emotions. Kids learn these things through playing” (p. 70). Bringing this brain research into the classroom offers children an opportunity to match their interests to learning what skills are needed to participate in society (Cutter-Mackenzie et al, 2014).

One curriculum that applies brain science rests in Project Based Learning (PBL) which uses the inquiry approach to learning (Tokuhama-Espinosa, 2008). Project Zero in Harlem, NY employs brain science to its arts education curriculum. Additional curricular models aligned with the brain in that they are not traditional teacher directed models are: Reggio Emilia, Montessori, International Baccalaureate and Steiner-Waldorf (Larrison, 2013; Ruenzel, 2001; Woods et al; 2005; Whitehead, 2010, p. 72). These models are usually not adopted in public school systems, but rather in private schools. Each of these models look to support young children in the activity of learning. While child development for children over eight years old predicts a more cognitive approach to learning as the ability to understand symbols for reading and math increases, children under eight years old are better suited for active exploration (Larrison, 2013; Giedd, 2006). Giedd uses reading as an example to explain that this skill is best fostered at an age later than preschool, although he cautions not to exclude the opportunity for all children based on their individual skills. He describes the pruning process of young brains as the synapsis that will grow as the other will be pruned away. Further studies show that play can shape a child’s brain architecture as children become increasingly social in negotiating play with their friends (Panksepp, 1984). Panksepp studied play in rats and found, “play activates the whole neocortex and we found that of the 1,200 genes that we measured, about one-third of them were
significantly changed simply by having a half-hour of play.” Panksepp believes play is in the ancient brain and it is what helps socialize our young children. Pellis (2006) argues that play undergirds the necessary skills needed in kindergarten to learn. In an interview, Pellis (Hamilton, 2014) explains, “countries where they actually have more recess tend to have higher academic performance than countries where recess is less.” Further, there is evidence that play helps people become more socially adept (Pellis, 2006) and there is evidence that shows the best predictor of academic performance in eighth grade was social skills in third grade. Play supports social relationships, as does the teacher-child relationship.

The importance of play in early childhood education is difficult to deny. Play supports all domains of the growing, developing and learning child. Teachers must be able to support their learners in the most effective way possible. However, play is difficult for teachers to employ in their practice because of the mounting demands for academic achievement. Further, teachers will spend a great deal of time dealing with behavior issues when using teaching strategies that require the restraint of a child’s need to explore and move in the classroom (Fischer and Frey, 2014). This can strain the teacher-child relationship (Ranz-Smith, 2012; Pianta, 2009; LoCosale et al, 2009).

**Teacher-child relationships.**

Teacher quality encompasses understanding how children grow and develop across domains and how teachers and schools influence a child’s growth and development (Berry, 2015; Meuman, 2014). Darling-Hammond (2005) explains, “Interpreting learners’ statements and actions and shaping productive experiences for them requires knowledge of child and adolescent development and an understanding of how to support growth in various domains -cognitive, social, physical and emotional” (p. 92). Meece and Schafer (2010) suggest, “schools not only
influence children’s acquisition of knowledge and skills, but also provide an important context for their social and emotional growth”.

The relationship a child has with a teacher is crucial to feeling successful in the classroom (Pianta, 2009). If teachers are not supported in the classroom, it is difficult for them to encourage young children’s learning (Brazelton, 1997; Vella et al., 2013). But, school systems themselves find it difficult not to be crushed by the increased demands of national initiatives such as No Child Left Behind (2002) and Race to the Top (2009), both of which seek to increase student achievement through measurable means (Barret & Breyer, 2014; Darling-Hammond, 2005; Williams, 2014; Tsasis, 2009).

**Public school systems and transitions**

Public school systems are complicated structures. Adding a prekindergarten dimension to systems that have been in place for decades with little planning for change makes the struggle for early childhood teachers palpable. Since kindergarten is the beginning of formal, it is fair to say that the prior demands of home or preschool experiences are different. The kindergarten environment brings with it formalized expectations, complete with an aligned curriculum for the next 12 years. There is a powerful academic coherence built in the kindergarten to twelfth grade public school system that is absent from the prekindergarten year to the kindergarten year of school. (Belsky & MacKinnon, 1994; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 1999). The coherence in smaller one to three-year prekindergarten systems focuses on comprehensive services to the child and family and a heavy reliance on community relationships such as experiences in programs such as Head Start, Early Intervention or in private childcare center (Belsky & MacKinnon, 1994; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 1999). The power of the kindergarten to twelfth grade system highlights the lack of coherent power in
smaller state funded child care, Head Start, private center or home-based provider; if not only because of the longevity of involvement with the k-12 system.

The prekindergarten year is shorter compared to the upcoming 13 years of school. In fact, the term, “preschool” implies that it is a feeder line to the formal school system and prekindergarten year is to be spent preparing children for formal schooling which will prepare them for the real work of life. This pressures teacher to prepare children for a future experience rather than teaching children at their current level of growth, development and learning capabilities (Saluja, Scott-Little & Clifford, 2000; Gesell, llg and Ames, 1974; Pandis, 2001; Murphy & Burns, 2002; Graue, 1992; Meisels, 1995, OECD, 2006). Preparing a young child for an upcoming experience can be very challenging in a system designed for children that have attained a level of development that prekindergarten children do not yet have.

School Readiness is a goal cited in many articles, state and federal Early Childhood Education frameworks and documents as an important achievement, prekindergarten and kindergarten teachers help prekindergartners attain. One aspect of school readiness is the transition from preschool learning programs into formal kindergarten to twelfth grade education. As reported during the National Education Goals Panel, “The prevailing view today is that readiness reflects a range of dimensions, such as a child’s health and physical development, social and emotional development, approaches to learning, language and communication skills, and cognitive and general knowledge” (California Department of Education, 2000). Yet, when kindergarten teachers are asked about what their concerns are for transitioning kindergarteners, teacher responses focus on the child’s ability to follow directions, academics and work independently (Pianta & Cox, 1998). Of course, these are foundational to a child’s success, but, at the same time, school readiness involves the equally important dimensions of social and
emotional development, communication skills and general knowledge (California Department of Education, 2000; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997, Belsky & MacKinnon, 1994) that will support the demands of formal schooling. Not only are academics and independence highlighted by teachers in the literature as important for smooth transition from preschool learning programs to formal kindergarten to twelfth grade education, but often advice given to schools and families from associations about transition highlights only the weeks or month prior to entering a kindergarten classroom as the focus of transition (Ferguson & Wood, 2005). However, attaining these levels of independence and academics require more than just the few weeks or months prior to entering kindergarten. Young children learn and develop over time and at different rates and, not only within the few weeks or month prior to entering the formal kindergarten to twelfth system (Brazelton, 1998; Piaget, 1964; Vygotsky, 1988; Erikson, 1979).

The transition between systems highlights the stark differences in expectations between the prekindergarten and kindergarten year. From an emphasis on learning social and emotional competence and developing physical coordination to an emphasis on memorization and repetition to learn academic skills, prekindergarten teachers and kindergarten teachers are tasked with the responsibility of structuring a developmental and academic hand off of young children without much support in place from school systems. If our youngest learners are not experiencing success in the transitional period from prekindergarten to kindergarten, there must be support in using effective teaching strategies in prekindergarten that are better aligned with the expectations in kindergarten.

The educational literature, specifically, reveals a number of significant studies targeting transition as one key to student outcomes (Ramey & Ramey, 1992; The National Education
Longitudinal Study, 1997; Meisels & Lias, 1993). Yet, a 2000 study by the National Center for Early Development and Learning (NCEDL) revealed that 48% of children transitioning to kindergarten have serious problems. Of the 48% families surveyed, 16% of the children were having a, “difficult or very difficult” entry into kindergarten (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta & Cox, 2000). More studies commissioned by the federal and state governments across the nation (NICHS Study of Early Child Care - NUCHD Early Child Care Research Network, 1998) yearn to understand and study the transitional period into kindergarten. There is wide agreement that transitioning from prekindergarten to kindergarten is crucial to a child’s success in school yet nearly half of the children going into kindergarten are having difficulty.

While some preschool programs are co-located in kindergarten through twelfth grade buildings and the transition would seem easier, it becomes apparent that it is more than just a visit to a colleague’s kindergarten classroom that will prepare a young child for that transition. There is an increase in specific academic skills before transitioning into kindergarten, but, the view of readiness still has as its basis for many state early childhood programs dimensions of physical, social and emotional development and approaches to learning (California Department of Education, 2000; Maine Department of Education, 2004; Texas Education Agency, 2008).

A closer look at how we are supporting teachers in the curriculum used to prepare prekindergarten partners and the expectations of kindergarten curriculum used by teachers would yield a better understanding of how to help young children transition from prekindergarten to kindergarten.

**Prekindergarten and school readiness**

School readiness suggests a complicated composition of thoughts and ideas associated with child development and learning in prekindergarten settings. The teachers in these settings
prepare children for entrance to the larger k-12 system. While there are different definitions of school readiness across our country, chronological age, developmental stage, specific academic and social skills, and home/school connections are all related to readiness (Graue, 1993, 2010). As reported during the National Education Goals Panel, “The prevailing view today is that readiness reflects a range of dimensions, such as a child’s health and physical development, social and emotional development, approaches to learning, language and communication skills, and cognitive and general knowledge” (California Department of Education, 2000).

State and federal early childhood education frameworks and documents, school readiness is an end goal for prekindergartners and their families and prekindergarten teachers (Early Childhood Development Teaching and Learning, National Center, 2016; National Center Parent, Family and Community Engagement, 2016; National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2006). However, by the same professional desire to meet the academic demands and prepare their students, kindergarten teachers are finding the students transitioning into their classrooms are having challenges.

In summary, school readiness is comprised of many dimensions that prekindergarten teachers must teach to in order for children to transition to kindergarten. However, the literature highlights that what kindergarten teachers in the formal kindergarten through twelfth grade system need to meet the rising demands of testing mandates focuses on less than half of the school readiness dimensions when surveyed about what they look for in transitioning students (Lynch, 2015). This different focus in school readiness dimensions and kindergarten expectations highlight the importance of exploring how prekindergarten teachers prepare transitioning prekindergarten children. Meeting the differences through an appropriate curriculum will serve transitioning prekindergartners and future kindergarteners well. One of the
more notable teaching strategies resulting in success for young children in meeting school readiness skills is play. Yet, play is on the decline as testing mandates continue to rise.

**Play**

Play is the instructional strategy of choice for prekindergarten teachers, especially working in a center accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Play is an important part of the curriculum for young children (Bedrova & Leong, 2004), but, in kindergarten, teachers rarely plan for play and tend to use play in the classroom as a reward or time to “blow off steam” and not a planned experience. Dewey, Rousseau and Froebel (Cutter-MacKenzie, 2014) are credited with noticing the importance of motivation in a child’s learning.

The research describes play as a, “widely-accepted” strategy for teaching young children the necessary skills and understanding of experiences in their life. It supports a child’s learning and development because of the, “combinatorial” elements play offers in a learning environment (Bruner, 1975). It offers an opportunity to young children for developmental growth and learning as well as affording their teachers an opportunity to effectively instruct and support the growth of young children in preparation for kindergarten. A concerted focus on a prekindergarten child’s learning, growth and development centering on school readiness abilities and capabilities of language and communication, their development of a learning approach and the four domains of development; cognitive, social and emotional and physical and health prepares a child for kindergarten (Berk, 2016). Using play as the method for this preparation continues to be documented through the research (Eberle, 2011; Fisher et al. 2011). But, awareness of the research on play is not enough for public preschool teachers to simply employ play in their curriculum and practice.
Supporting Teachers

Supporting teachers is paramount to reviving play as an effective teaching strategy to support learning outcomes for young children. But, we must support our early childhood teachers in the use of play in the classroom. The obstacles to supporting teachers in employing play lie heavily at the feet of increased testing mandates (NCLB, 2002). These obstacles play out at the classroom level in several ways. There is a misalignment between what prekindergarten teachers must teach to meet school readiness demands and what kindergarten teachers are expecting children transitioning into kindergarten to have as an academic basis.

For example, when kindergarten teachers in the kindergarten through twelfth grade system are asked about what their concerns are for transitioning kindergarteners, teacher’s responses focus on the child’s ability to follow directions, academics and work independently (Pianta & Cox, 1998). Of course, the ability to follow directions (such as lining up when asked, or how to play a game), academics and working independently are foundational to a young child’s success in school and are often carefully sharpened and honed through consistent repetition. At five and six years old, this consistent cognitive repetition is often well managed by the typically developing child. There is a level of social and emotional development, communication skills and general knowledge learning (California Department of Education, 2000; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997, Belsky & MacKinnon, 1994) that a transitioning kindergarten child has to achieve to meet the teacher’s expectation to follow directions, understand academics and work independently. However, the body of the three and four-year-old preschool child requires repetition through use of the whole body to sharpen and hone these skills (Piaget, 1998; Vygotsky, 1980; Erikson, 1950; Brazelton, 2002).
Many of the reasons for teachers losing support for play in their classrooms center on the noise that comes with a classroom filled with loud and exploring prekindergarten children along with the overall messiness (Goldhaber, 1995). For other schools, it is the media that has disparaged teachers so much that a desire to show increased test scores would be one strategy for fighting back (Barrett and Breyer, 2014). Still another reason is the cost of materials and equipment for young children to play with and explore increases a district budget.

Teachers of older children, families, and administrators find play may not be pedagogically sound. To effectively support young children by employing play, children need lengthy blocks of time in their schedule to allow children to explore and play with the materials and their ideas. Many public schools have specials that children transition to during their school day outside of their regular classroom (Goldhaber, 1995). Teachers must also explain their use of play in the classroom to administrators who are pressed for higher test scores, teachers of older children who need children to arrive with a certain academic baseline and parents who may not see the benefits of play (Goldhaber, 1995).

The literature is rich in describing the importance of play in the early childhood classroom. It is abundant in offering teachers how to employ play and to bring this research to practice. But, there is a paucity of research that describes what supports teachers currently lean on to promote play as practice in their classrooms in the face of a lack of alignment between preschool and kindergarten. This highlights further the need to support teachers in effective practice and teaching strategies.

**Summation**

Studies and current research from the psychological, medical, anthropological and educational stance argue that young children benefit from a curriculum during the
prekindergarten years when teachers use play. However, there are significant claims that even with this knowledge, teachers are not supported to employ play in the curriculum (Goldhaber, 1995; Lynch, 2015).

Prekindergarten teachers are often prepared to employ play in their classrooms, yet, they are not successful carrying it through as a practice. The trend of public school prekindergarten teachers having to abandon play increases as public-school systems highlight test scores as important. This becomes more apparent as prekindergarten children transition to kindergarten and there are challenges for 48% of transitioning prekindergartners. The developmental trajectory for young children at this age is being set at this juncture. This change in a child’s development, along with the reduction of play in the classroom demonstrates the urgency and commitment needed to support teachers in using play in the classroom.

The gaps in the literature are specific to magnet schools and to prekindergarten teachers’ experiences in preparing children for kindergarten. This type of school is often left out of the literature in favor of traditional schools in school districts, private schools and charter schools. Exploring more fully the experience of prekindergarten teachers who teach in a magnet school setting will give personal insight and perspective to the magnet school setting and give rise to themes important to this topic.

The cross points of the developing child and the early childhood classroom is a crucial intersection for giving young children the opportunity to be successful in their early learning. The research shows how children experience their early learning classroom will play out in the ability to attend to learning more difficult academic subject matter as they move through the kindergarten to twelfth grade school system. Achieving adequate test scores and successful peer interactions is built on early experiences that shape a child’s early development. These positive
experiences that are planned and facilitated by a teacher based on an understanding of a child’s early development will undergird the skills needed for academic and social success in later years. When young children are allowed to play, they develop a shared understanding shaped by peers and teachers who are interacting with them, increasing self and co-regulation. This is a needed step in development that can then increase their capacity for attending to more challenging learning (Pianta, 2009).

There are recurrent arguments in the research of the importance of teacher and student relationships and the impact of those relationships on a child’s learning. Teachers and students shape their relationship based on daily reciprocal interactions that form the basis of their relationship. Teacher’s abilities to further a positive student teacher relationship to increase a child’s learning are reliant upon the belief in their capabilities and to foster learning for each child. Naturally, employing play as a strategy would benefit both the teacher and the child; for the teacher because of the plethora of opportunity to teach and promote inquiry and persistence and for the child because there is a way to express curiosity, exploration and movement.

Further, research discussion indicates that school districts are under severe pressure to show advancing achievement in test scores (NCLB, 2002), which is then tied to funding. Play is not measured in terms of math and reading comprehension, leaving districts in a difficult position.

These themes in the research are significant because being ready for school and transitioning to kindergarten is an essential component to beginning a successful student throughout one’s academic career. To support teachers to prepare young children for kindergarten, aligning the expectations of both kindergarten and prekindergarten teachers about what school readiness is will create an opportunity for young children to experience
prekindergarten in a way that advances their growth, development and learning. Having a shared understanding between prekindergarten and kindergarten teachers will provide a continuum that will offer strategies to meet the needs of each and every child for successful outcomes.

This research explored how prekindergarten teachers prepare prekindergarten children for kindergarten. It looked specifically at three prekindergarten teachers in a public magnet school prekindergarten classroom to explore how they prepare prekindergarten children for kindergarten. This study sought to discover influences on prekindergarten teachers and the impact on how they employed play for school readiness preparation during the prekindergarten school year.

Conclusion

As young children transition from prekindergarten to kindergarten, 48% experience challenges (NCEDL, 2000). Although there is evidence to support the use of play in the preschool classroom, play is declining, leaving prekindergarten teachers unsupported in employing an effective teaching strategy that may assist in a smoother transition. The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of prekindergarten teachers in how they prepare prekindergarten children for kindergarten.
Chapter Three: Research Design

Each year, prekindergarten teachers are faced with preparing young children for kindergarten. They are often trained in teacher development programs on the importance of play based on child development and grooming children for the rigor associated with formal schooling. Compounding this charge, however, is the stress of preparing children who are three and four years old with very different repertoires of experiences and cognitive abilities. Tensions between what a teacher believes to be the best strategy, play, and the requirements of having a child ready to transition into kindergarten, creates an experience to be explored.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was used for this study because this research centers on the experience of early childhood educators (Creswell, 2013). Butin (2010) offers that this paradigm is often behind research that tells a story through exploration, description, review or evaluation of phenomena. According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research includes components that set it apart from quantitative research. Using inductive data analysis, making meaning of data through co-construction with participants are some ways that qualitative research is set apart from quantitative research. Additionally, the data is useful in understanding complex social issues. Butin (2010) contends that the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm is co-created and interpreted between the researcher and the participants in the study (Butin, 2010; Ponterotto, 2005). The design of this study is anchored in constructivist/interpretivist paradigm. Qualitative methodology for this research was an optimal match because this research was inductive. Exploring the experiences of prekindergarten teachers generated a particular understanding about how they prepare young children for kindergarten from the themes that emerge from the data. The point of view of the research participant is captured in the qualitative method through
interviews that allows the participants and opportunity to discuss their experience in detail. From this detail, the data is analyzed for themes. While the themes may not be generalizable, the data provides a portal into the lived experiences of the participants in this research.

The methodology of choice was narrative inquiry. This approach detailed how the prekindergarten teacher faced the pressures of preparing prekindergarten children for transition to kindergarten in the context of their lives. The narrative methodology allowed for a highly-contextualized description of the teacher experience. As the researcher co-constructing the participants’ stories using their timelines of events and happenings, moving the story along from unorganized to the organized and situating the story in their context offered a way to discuss the point to the story. The narrative takes a large event of preparing transitioning prekindergartners ready for kindergarten through a story that offered the multiple perspectives of the participants. This allowed for a strong vehicle to understand the teacher's experience. Narrative inquiry seeks to re-present the life experiences of individual with meaning (Clandinin & Connelly, 2013), therefore, the child and adult experience could be retold in meaningful episode.

The narrative methodology allowed for deeply contextualized description of the teacher’s experience. The researcher was able to comprehend the participants’ stories through use of semi structured interviews, timelines of events and happenings, pictures, movies and other data that contextualized the individual’s life. The participant is the knower and the researcher the “student”. Yet, researchers bring their own positionality to the work, increasing the importance of engaging in reflexive work as part of the research. This approach has varied methods of analysis that call for attention to moving the story along from unorganized to the organized. Further, these choices in analysis (structured analysis, an interactional analysis or thematic analysis) are used to interpret rich, individualized data from interviews, artifacts, visual data and
daily encounters with materials. Utilizing a combination of these methods and the combination of rich data provided a strong vehicle to capture the story of how a prekindergarten teacher prepares a transition kindergarten student. Since the Narrative approach is reflexive in its nature, it was key the researcher make herself apparent in the story.

The researcher was responsible for interpreting with the individual the phenomena and as such the audience should know where the researcher is in the work. The Narrative continuum can give voice to marginalized groups as the researcher and participant seek to understand the sensitivity of narrative practices and narrative environment. It is an approach that is on a continuum of inductive inquiry that on the one hand is so creative that some researcher can’t bear to call it a research method. On the other end of the continuum, researchers in the field have developed procedures and structures that allow for these data to be analyzed and findings to be made. This provides more than one vehicle to support the plurality of data and interpretation of teachers’ voices (Creswell, 2013).

**Research Design**

The structure for this study was the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm. This best fit exploring the experiences of how prekindergarten teachers prepared children to transition into kindergarten. Exploring these lived experiences using empirical data gained from the teacher interviews match with the constructivist-interpretivist design that allows for multiple realities to surface. The set of paradigmatic assumptions of the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm guided this research. Narrative inquiry looks deeply at the lived experience of the research participant and it is situated in the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, collaborating with the participants to, “re-story” the participants experience as part of the research process (Creswell, 2012). In doing so, validating the story throughout the research process is important. This was addressed
through member checking and keeping memos that sought to highlight illogical or “disconfirming evidence” (Creswell, 2013, p. 516). The multiple truths that emerged from the research based on the interpretation and co-creation with the participants and researcher were gained through interviews, observations and telling the participants story (Ponterotto, 2005). The prekindergarten teacher participant’s experiences varied in preparing young children for kindergarten and because of that this research looked for the varying perspective of each participant to understand the different strategies and methods used to prepare prekindergartners for kindergarten.

This research, designed to study the experiences of prekindergarten teachers preparing children to transition to kindergarten using narrative inquiry in the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, revealed the phenomenon teachers experienced in the classroom. Using interviews, observations, memos and telling their story in the qualitative research tradition, specifically, narrative inquiry offered a critical look into how transitioning prekindergarten children are prepared for kindergarten.

Post Structuralist Research Narrative Tradition

The post structuralist narrative tradition is situated in social research as a humanist paradigm. The approach was an approach that was contrary to the positivist paradigm. Yet, even within social research, the narrative approach had differences. While story structure and content are part of the social research, Foucault, Derrida, Althusser and Lacan, Gergen and Sampson (as cited by Andrews, 2013) brought forth a nuance in social research that focused on the power relationships in the narrative, making meaning, and the understanding that there are many subjective opinions in the, “production and understanding” (Andrews, 2013) of the narrative. This led to the underpinning of who has the knowledge and the understanding that the participant
is the knower and the storyteller. The philosophical keystones of the Narrative approach are considered post-structuralist or post-modernist. It is termed the, “narrative turn” because it allows for human experiences in research that were lacking in the 1960’s (Chase, 2005). Post structuralism questioned the idea that there is one path to understanding social phenomena; a reaction to positivist research. Growing agreement among theorists that multiple interpretations of truth exists as it is constructed and acted upon by individuals led to understanding the creation of knowledge in terms of Constructivism/Interpretivism and Critical Theory (Foucault, Derrida, Althusser, Lacan & Gergen as cited by Andrews, 2013). Further, understanding that widely accepted social norms by those in power, and further supported in hegemonic structures at the expense of individuals outside of the power structures, were accepted as “truth”. This acceptance of one “truth” resulted in marginalizing entire populations of people. The Constructivism/Interpretivism and Critical Theory paradigms began to flourish and allowed for a new way of thinking. Among the alternative theories that took root are: Feminist, Queer and LBGT theory.

One stabilizing aspect of the Narrative approach as a methodology is the social research’s focus on power relationships. Researchers embarked on making meaning with their research participants and making transparent that bias is a part of the narrative approach. Understanding that there are many subjective opinions in the “production and understanding” of knowledge leads to understanding how the Narrative tradition in qualitative research sees the narrator as the knower and the researcher as the learner. The humanist and poststructuralist traditions aligned with the constructivism/interpretivist and critical theory paradigm in qualitative research can be used not only to give voice to marginalized populations, but also, change social circumstances.
To this end of knowledge production, Bruner’s (1991) contribution was through his work of presenting different ways of knowing. He brought to the Narrative approach the idea that one can create and construct stories of lived experience and generate meanings for those events. This way of knowing allows individuals to make sense of the layers in human experience. Narrative research allows us to organize complex, layered and complicated information about how individuals interpret their lives (Etherington, 2012). John Dewey’s (1938) seminal work in inquiry provides a basis for the narrative inquiry researcher and participant to enter into a valuable space of developing and understanding. Trahar (2009) offers that narrative research reveals how a participant’s story was created, the meaning behind the story through the varying methods. Its grounding in phenomenology and hermeneutics brings the narrative inquiry tradition to the forefront in understanding the lived and storied experiences of prekindergarten teachers preparing young children to transition to kindergarten.

**Scholarly Debate within the Narrative Approach**

The scholarly debate lies both in the broad-brush strokes and in the, “nooks and crannies” of the Narrative approach. The broader debate lies in the following: (a) expansion in the type of data that is considered Narrative comes largely from the advent of technology. This recent burgeoning is responsible for the advent of increased layers of data that add value to the story of people’s lives. With this new level of data, ethical issues of confidentiality and publishing are surfacing (Clandinin & Murphy, 2007), (b) with the expansion of narrative research there is a desire to read the current research and discuss with colleagues how to assess which data best explains the layered and multiple narrative environments that exist (Chase, 2005), (c) because of the lack of definition of Narrative research, there is question as to who are our Narrative colleagues and will there be common ground among us as we grow? (Clandinin & Murphy,
The nooks and crannies debate lie deeper in the work. This debate looks at the following:

(a) the “tyranny of the transcript” (Andrews et al., 2008) as the privileged indicator of an individual’s life story is ongoing. The discussions rest on asking why those who work with small narratives or differing materials than transcripts are not legitimized. There is a desire to legitimize the “small stories” (Andrews et al, 2008) in narrative research, (b) while there are many debates in this growing field, one of the more dominant is in how the story is presented. The question is, if the story is presented in narrative form (language) then how are we sure it is representative of the storyteller and not the researcher?

Unique perspectives in the Narrative approach focus on the following: (a) the primary method in Narrative approach is language yet, language is often secondary as researchers search for meaning behind the language. Further, because tone of voice, pauses, laughter (paralanguage); visual elements: eye movements, facial expression body posture and gestures, and aspects of emotionality are hard to define and measure, there is discussion about the researcher having the ability to interpret it, (b) time, Narrative talk offers a temporal description, but, the visual elements that can be collected in narrative research don’t always lend themselves to a timeline. To address this, the use of episodic narrative allows for the story of an individual to be told, (c) researchers turn the analytic lens fully and specifically on themselves with the goal to “show” rather than tell. This is in response to the hegemonic structure in the Narrative approach of the interview. (Denzin, Ellis, Jones, Schneider, Scott-Hoy and Ellis as cited in Saldana, 2015), (d) engagement in ethno theater which is staging the story, literally. (Anna Deavere Smith, Isherwood, Madison, Kaufman as cited by Chase, 2005). But, perhaps, one of the most hopeful perspectives and divergent thinking lies with Chase and Plummer (2005). They ask us to begin to look at the narrative environment and be aware of what is working as much as
where there is a social injustice. They question, “What to do when the audience is influenced by the Narrative work?”

**Researcher’s Role in Constructivism-Interpretivism**

Reflexivity and reflection will be the first defense in guarding against the researcher’s biases (Kohl & McCutcheon, 2015; Bourke 2014; Fennell and Arnot, 2008; Briscoe, 2005). Making sense of experience as researchers through everyday conversation keeps questions of power in the forefront of one’s mind. Being transparent during the research process brings forth the opportunity to engage in the process with an understanding of how the researcher may be shaped by the participants with whom the researcher comes into contact and the experience of both the participant and the researcher. These processes allow for increased awareness of the nuances of one’s biases and the significance of those nuances on the study, therefore, consistent conversation and reflection on the study is foundational to the authenticity, importance and relevance of this research data.

In keeping a reflexive perspective, this researcher attempted to account and filter through biases with regard to what was included and excluded in the study. Through use of analytic and reflective memos and field notes, this researcher continued to be aware that positionality was part of this research process. Engaging in reflexivity is crucial in the constructivist – interpretivist paradigm as the researcher prepares, organizes, codes and analyzes the data (Reigler, 2012; Creswell, 2013).

Should the data indicate that there is minimal importance in exploring the stories of teachers to increase an understanding of how prekindergarten teachers prepare children for kindergarten, the researcher planned to turn to the study paradigm, framework, methods and data and experience to understand what themes surfaced that were important. Recognizing the
researcher’s biases and modifying the methods and data interpretation to be critically aware of these biases in order to evaluate and interpret study results was essential to contributing to the field of education and its practice.

**Participants**

The sample of people for this study was identified by the location of the school, current licenses and grade level. The participants were currently teaching in a public magnet school. The teachers were prekindergarten teachers with valid teaching licenses. Five to seven prekindergarten teachers working in a public magnet school with prekindergarten and kindergarten students were considered. Using a non-probability purposive sampling process of selection (Trochim, 2006) to explore the experiences of the teachers assisted in the focus of what the teachers saw as the issue. This number of participants chosen was keeping with the qualitative approach, narrative inquiry, which was in search of a thick, rich narrative to explore the details of the teachers’ experiences.

**Recruitment and Access**

This researcher intended to recruit licensed, prekindergarten public-school teachers. While this researcher was the assistant principal in the school in which the research participants work, the researcher does not currently supervise any of the teachers nor work in the state. This researcher planned on recruiting prekindergarten teachers. The age range, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic level, and number of years of experience varied with each participant and was not considered a factor in choosing research participants. This researcher first requested permission from the superintendent via email. With permission granted, the researcher asked for participation from the teachers. The researcher sent an email request to prospective participants teaching prekindergarten in the school.
The criteria for participation in the study required the prekindergarten teacher to be a teacher in a public magnet school that housed both prekindergarten and kindergarten children. The teacher had to possess a current and valid teaching license. The prekindergarten teachers must have had at least one prekindergarten child transitioning into kindergarten. Through the email invitation to participate, the teacher was made aware that it was voluntary, confidential and anonymous. It also informed teachers that there would be no impact on their employment.

**Data Collection and Storage**

Typically, the Narrative approach collects data that illustrates context specific to the story being told by the participant. Marshall and Rossman (2011) describe data collected for the Narrative approach to assist in telling the story of the narrator. Typically collected data (as cited by Marshall and Rossman, 2011) can be found in the examples below: (a) Life histories: A timeline of significant times or memories of when the participant developed/or didn’t develop a shared experience with a young learner. (Jones, Dollard, Mandelbaum, Sparks, Atkinson, Edgerton & Langness, Cole & Knowles, Lawless); (b) Film for navigating public places. For example, video and photography (Ryave & Schenkin); (c) Navigating Space: (Whyt); (d) Artifacts - lesson plans, philosophy of teaching from interview (or recently updated one), portfolios, pictures of current/past classrooms, past teaching projects and photographs of children’s work or their work that would shed light on the teachers lives. Collages, drawings, observation of play in the classroom, routines and schedules during the day over time; (e) Wedding films - (Banks); (f) Story Telling – Ask teachers to share stories that will be audiotaped or videoed about how they think/feel about teaching young learners. Looking for the “small stories” (Chase, 2011) that shed light on the silenced voice; and (g) Writing communications Letters, emails, documents (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990). Further there is
event-centered Narratives that focus on the spoken word to retell and there is the experience-centered which includes various media that can be used from shopping lists to videos. But both types assume to be an “individual, internal representation of phenomena- events, thoughts and feelings – to which narrative gives external expression (Andrews, 2013, p. 5).

These methods of data collection are designed to register the rich and thick detail of participant’s experience. For this study, the research participants were asked to share their experiences through informal and conversational style interviews, journals and one follow up interview, if necessary. A protocol was developed with several questions, (no more than five), to allow participants to speak/communicate more fully. It consisted of:

- A request for demographic data that could be combined in a descriptive data statistical format. Examples would be data about age, ethnicity, highest education level, previous and current work roles, race, country of birth, marital status and family status.
- A review of the study process with participants.
- Sign informed consent forms with a reminder to the participant that they had the ability to back out of the study or ask questions at any time.

Further, data was collected through interview questions that elicited an open, trusting, sharing and descriptive responses. For example, “Tell me about a time when” or, “Tell me about your experience” or, “Who were you with?” Or, “What happened, then? How long did that go on? When did you realize that it couldn’t go on?” What Kind of sense did you make of all that?” These interview questions dovetail with the structural analysis method in the Narrative tradition. For example, “When did you realize that it could not go on?” is a turning point in a story, and, “What kind of sense did you make of all that?” Mark Freeman (1993) describes this work as a “window” which allows a view into the narrator’s life. For this research design, collecting the in-
depth information about each research participant in order to deeply explore the prekindergarten teachers' experience, the research design must be grounded in capturing the participants' lived experiences; their stories.

Collecting these data is a central focus of research. However, in the Narrative tradition, it is important researchers prepare themselves to interact with these data because of the reflexive nature of this approach. Having completed a literature review of the current scholarship anchored in education, psychology, and child development, teacher effectiveness, school readiness, transitions, and child development for children birth to age eight and finding that the gaps in the research indicate a need to understand better how our youngest learners are being prepared in prekindergarten.

The data collection phase gathered the information needed for analysis of the narrative and determined themes, ideas, and insights. Collecting data focused on the following:

- **Analytic Memos**
- **Field notes** throughout the process captured this researcher’s thoughts, ideas, observations, judgments, and insights (Connelly and Clandinin, 2000).
- **Semi Structured interview** that asked teachers to share stories were audiotaped about how they thought/felt about teaching young learners. Looking for the “small stories” (Chase, 2011) that shed light on the silenced voice.

These methods of data collection were co-constructed between the researcher and the participant. After this step, the researcher collected all of the stories for analysis (Creswell, 2007).

Storing the data to ensure confidentiality was of the utmost importance to the researcher. The data was stored in a password-protected computer, mobile device, or locked safe. All data...
will be destroyed three years from the completion date with only the published findings still available. Research participants were given the option to ensure the validity and security measures for the data.

**Data Analysis and Coding**

Within the context of self-efficacy, what teachers believe about their capabilities is a crucial factor in determining practice. The impact of child development and belief about the best teaching approach for the prekindergarten child who is transitioning to kindergarten, for example, is closely tied to what the child will experience in the prekindergarten classroom. A teacher’s personal beliefs will determine the behavior and environment that will influence how a child experiences “getting ready” for kindergarten. Supporting teachers in the classroom is an issue for teachers with low efficacy based on the difficulty in maintaining discipline using child-centered practices (McMullen, 1997; Lara-Cinisomo et al, 2009).

**Data Analysis Narrative Approach:**

Once these data were collected, the process of Narrative approach constructed texts for further analysis. Narratives require interpretation (Reissman, 2005, p.1) and are reviewed for deeper and missed meaning. Further, using a combination of methods gave a comprehensive interpretation of the story by taking into account the varied contexts for which each analysis calls.

Phase I:

1. Transcribed the interview, summarizing each participant’s story (Rubin and Rubin, 2012; Riessman, 2008).
2. Conducted MAXQDA coding protocol as the 1st cycle of data analysis. Coded all data using participant’s own language. Engage in 2nd level coding to analyze the relationships between the themes resulting from the primary level coding.

3. Triangulated data from documents, research notes, audio tapes, records of communication to ensure dependability (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

4. Maintained analytic memos to increase trustworthiness of the process. (Creswell, 2003)

Phase II:

1. Identified which methods of analyses best interpret the centrality and nuances of the story. Once the researcher engages with the desired method s/he toggles among these data from interviews, observation and the “scholarship of others” (Tamboukou as cited in Reissmann, 2008, p. 66) and allow themes to surface.

2. Chose thematic analysis results and clustered themes across the stories (2nd cycle), The second cycle coding resulted in collapsing identified first cycle codes into categories allowing for clusters of data. The pattern codes allowed for emergent themes to surface and develop the beginnings of giving meaning to these data.

3. Emerging patterns of similar concepts between narratives in core concepts, stark differences in concepts and errant concepts were grouped providing insights to the story of the participant as described in developing a shared experience with young learners. The result of the second cycle coding was expressed through major themes. The themes were supported with evidence from the interview.

4. Described in deep, thick detail. Drew out participant quotes to support identified themes ensures transferability (Reissman, 2008).
5. Conducted member check to increase trustworthiness of analysis through credibility 
   (Creswell, 2003; Lincoln and Guba, 1995).

6. Conducted audit for confirmability of data (Reissman, 2008).

Analyzing these data using these inductive techniques helped to translate the experience of 
the participant and researcher to understand the co-created story. There are three methods of 
analysis that could be used to analyze these data.

**Thematic Analysis:**

In this method of analysis, the emphasis is on what is being said. The language is the path to the 
meaning as it is grouped based on the language used. This is a used often in Grounded Theory. 
Thematic analysis collects elements from across cases based on what participants offer in their 
stories. Nuances in the narrator’s story can be lost because of the focus on text.

Thematic analysis codes qualitative information through developing codes, words or phrases 
during these data analyses. While Thematic Analysis can be used to turn qualitative data into 
quantitative data, as an inductive approach it allows for themes to emerge through coding and 
constant comparison of these data with an emphasis on, “what is being said” versus, “how it is 
being said” (Reissman, 2005).

This research focused on thematic analysis while marking facial and body language as 
integral to the data.

**Presentation of Findings**

After member checking to ensure credibility, the findings for Narrative Research can be 
displayed in various ways (Creswell, 2002). The presentation is based on the audience for whom 
the researcher has conducted the research; the Researcher is now the Narrator. For example, if 
Narrative Researchers are looking for social change, they will present work in public forums to
stimulate dialogue about “complex moral matters” and the need for social change. These might take the form of art, photography, videos, plays, poetry or stories (Knowles & Cole; Barone, Madison & Hamera, Mattingly as cited in Chase, 2013). These data could be displayed in ways that human rights organizations, public awareness or legislators can digest the information. For example, protests, public health announcements or speeches for Congress. Display of the information could also take the form of presenting at conferences, publishing the stories or creating a play. Narrative research offers an opportunity to hear, see and feel the nuances and particular experiences of the storyteller. This study represented findings by discussing the finding and citing the specific text from the interview to support the finding. The data was used to support assertions and explanations. The main method of display is a discussion of themes supported by the text from the interviews and communications. This supports a flow for both the first and second cycle of data analysis.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is the reliability of qualitative research. To ensure trustworthiness, this researcher used field and analytic memos to capture what was observed. For example, noting the setting of the interview, the gestures, facial expressions of the participant and other indicators of the participants’ overall participation was described using a pseudonym in the field notes. The analytic memos ensured trustworthiness because it captures what the researcher is interpreting from the participants interviews. It serves a way to identify, “gaps and flaws in the relationships of categories and of the logic” (Groenewald, 2008, p. 2). This memo showed what the researcher learned from this interview about the participant, the study and what the data highlights from the interviews. Each memo contains one idea and is dated to ensure credibility to the process. Additionally, reflective memos were used to explore this researcher’s biases, beliefs and
perspectives during the research process. In the qualitative tradition, the Researcher writes for trustworthiness through ensuring credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Andrews, 2013; Lincoln and Guba, 1995) through the reflexive process. As Hammersley and Polkinghorne (2008), point out, the aim of research is to understand the meaning attached to events. Researchers do not have to claim theirs is the right meaning, but, at least a viable one, grounded in texts.

This researcher ensured that confidentiality was maintained through appropriate safeguards. One way was through use of pseudonyms in all data for all participants, no names of schools, locations or job titles were used. All identifying information was changed to ensure confidentiality for all participants.

Validity, Reliability and Generalizability

In qualitative research, specifically the narrative inquiry approach does not look to generalize to a larger population. Using the non-probable purposive sample for a small, predefined group will reveal a rich and thick storied narrative that can be assigned only to the participants in the research. The validity is ascertained through the hermeneutics of trustworthiness that seeks to employ the analytic memo and field notes to bring constant awareness of the researcher’s biases, power and trust with and in relationship to the participant. The first and second cycle data analysis and member checking are measures that will ensure reliability. Also, the rigor of coding will add to the reliability of the research.

Protection of Human Subjects

All participants are assured confidentiality. Pseudonyms were used for all participants as well as the school name. All data is with this researcher until I lock the data in the safe in my home. I am the only person with access to locking and unlocking this safe. The people listed on
this application are the only other individuals who had access to this data. Each is covered by the IRB. The interview stories were used to be re-storied and analyzed for meaning and themes. Once this process was concluded, hard copy and electronic copies were permanently destroyed. In the future, only the published findings in the dissertation will be available.

There were no inherent or anticipated risks to either the participants or the researcher. Measures to keep confidentiality were taken to ensure the anonymity of each participant and school district. All paper data is stored in a locked safe in my home and all digital data is stored in a password protected electronic device in a locked safe.

There were no anticipated risks. Pseudonyms for the participants, as well as the school district were used should an accidental viewing of information occur. All electronic data is permanently deleted once transcribed and remain password protected prior to deletion.

All participants were asked to share the stories and experiences they have had in preparing transitioning prekindergarten children to kindergarten. They were asked to talk about all aspects of their experience. They were asked a series of interview questions with follow up questions. They were asked to revisit the interview to ensure their stories were represented accurately. The time and location were at the discretion of each participant. The interview session was no more 60 minutes. The follow up sessions were approximately 45 minutes each and were at a time and place chosen by the participant. I did not anticipate any long-term follow up.

**Obtaining Informed Consent**

Obtaining informed consent from each participant in this research was a result of a detailed oral explanation of the role of the participant. Then, a review of the consent form in which each participant was invited to participate on a voluntary basis with an explanation of
what the research entailed, why they were being invited, how much time it would take (approximately), the risks and how confidentiality would be maintained during the research was discussed. The participant was then asked to read and sign the consent form.

The teachers were asked about their experiences in preparing transitioning prekindergarten children to kindergarten. They were asked to share their experiences and could stop at any time. They participated in reviewing the themes and offered questions and asked for clarification of any part of the study. There were no anticipated risks to participating in this study.

**Internal Review Board Approval**

This research began after this researcher obtained approval of the Doctoral Thesis Proposal (DTP) and for the “Application for Approval for Use of Human Participation in Research” by Northeastern University’s Internal Review Board (IRB).
Chapter Four

Personal Accounts of Public Magnet School Prekindergarten Teachers: A Sketch of Six Prekindergarten Teachers

Found in this chapter are stories of six prekindergarten teachers who have dedicated their lives to the education of young children. The intricacies of their experience in preparing prekindergartners for kindergarten was centered on their lived experiences. The social learning theory regarding self-efficacy provided the lens for teacher’s capabilities in teaching. Bruner’s Developmental Theory (1985) undergirds the interpretation of how young children learn. Chapter 4 describes the stories of magnet school prekindergarten teachers preparing prekindergartners for kindergarten and the number of complications for a prekindergarten teacher materialize in front of us. These experiences are personal to six prekindergarten teachers who live their lives as professionals in world of deep relationships with young children and their families who have made a choice to attend a magnet school.

Butin (2010) explains that the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm is co-created and interpreted between the researcher and the participants in the study (Butin, 2010; Ponterotto, 2005). The stories written here are a result of co-creating with prekindergarten teachers as this researcher and each teacher made meaning of the phenomena of preparing prekindergartners for kindergarten. As a co-creator, this researcher collected data by spending significant time with the participants in spaces of their choosing such as, classrooms, a coffee shop and library meeting room for up to an hour to interview, delve deeply into their stories.

After the interviews, this researcher conducted an analysis of the data. Trahar (2009) offers that narrative research reveals how a participant’s story was created, the meaning behind the story through re-storying. Its grounded in phenomenology (the participants experience) and
hermeneutics (trustworthy interpretation), brings the narrative inquiry tradition to the forefront in understanding the lived and storied experiences of individuals. The “re-storying” of prekindergarten teachers preparing young children to transition to kindergarten in this study is based on the participant’s stories that opened the door to understanding the participant’s educational stance, why and for whom it was being told and how the story came to be.

Each teacher’s narrative is described below. Pseudonyms are used in all instances. Strong and emerging themes are discussed after each teacher’s story is narrated. The interpretations made by this researcher are based on the interviews that took place and are filtered through and co-constructed in light of the teachers lived experiences and the acute awareness of delicate nature of topics that were visited during the interviews.

**Annie: Preparing Young Children is like Art – It’s a Process Thing, Not a Product-**

Annie and I met to interview in the parents’ room at her prekindergarten-kindergarten Magnet school, one and one-half weeks before the 2017-18 school year was to begin. The parents’ room was dismal in color with furniture pushed against the wall. Unopened boxes were strewn across the floor. It was definitely the week before school opened. Books on the two large bookshelves held parenting advice and counsel on reading, writing, parenting and math in colorful books. There were toys dispersed among the books and children’s books stacked horizontally next to the toys. In front of the bookshelves was a tan couch and purple chair at a right angle to each other. It crossed my mind that the timing these interviews and the others that were planned for this week might illicit a different tone than were the interviews to be conducted at a later time in the year or even at the end of the year.

Annie started her teaching career in 1986 as a teacher in a faith based childcare center. It was the first time that she learned about the, “green book”, the National Association for the
Education of Young Children (NAEYC) position statement for developmentally appropriate practice. For Annie, “that is where it all started”. She had her Associates degree and it was after the childcare center she worked at became NAEYC that she went back for her Bachelor’s degree. It was during her undergraduate work that she worked with preschool children. Finding it different than working with infants and toddlers, less exhausting, but equally “amazing”, Annie stayed with prekindergartners for the next thirty-one years. Eleven of those years at her current school at which she has been working since it opened in 2005. Currently, Annie holds a Master’s degree in Education plus an additional 20 credits toward her sixth year. The school at which Annie teaches has the prekindergarten designed to accept three and four-year-old children into one room. Annie describes prekindergarten classrooms in this school as serving three and four-year-old children during the year with the hope that the three-year-old children she has will come back to her class as four-year old children.

As we settled into the interview space that Annie had chosen, Annie’s eyes darted from bookshelf to door to me with a smile on her mouth, but not in her eyes. To kick off what would be an emotional 49 minutes and 38 seconds, I asked her how she became interested in teaching prekindergarten. Sitting in the purple chair at a right angle to me on the couch she moved to the edge of the chair and answered, “I wanted to be an art major. I love to draw, but, I am very slow at everything I do, including report cards, which are so overwhelming for me because they have to be a perfect snapshot of my kids because I can’t do anything less.”

Annie’s long-standing teaching experience as a prekindergarten teacher coupled with her early NAEYC accreditation experience, brought us to explore more deeply how that accreditation process shaped her choice to teach in a Magnet school. This exploration was key to understanding Annie’s basic philosophy of how she prepares prekindergartners for kindergarten.
This setting [the magnet school] is a lot more diverse [than the faith based setting]. We’ve had a population, now, of course, this coming year will be different because we will be drawing from different communities, but up ’til now, we’ve serviced ABC [Suburban] town and 123 [Urban] town [only]. 123 town, as you know, and you can see that striking difference between families based on socio-economic situations, cultural backgrounds, where children are developmentally...well, that’s been the hardest thing for me, really. I feel almost moved because I wish that I could do more for those kids that just haven’t been read to and they haven’t had the experience in this world. And, they come in and they already are so far behind. They don’t know how, you know?

Annie, gets up as she finishes the last center and walks across the room. “See! I’m just looking for a tissue, got myself all emotional. Well, it’s cold in here, too.” I was taken aback, although not uncomfortable, by the Annie’s emotion. Annie continued anxious to put the tears behind us.

I feel like we should be preparing children for the academic piece, you know, literacy, mathematics, you know, science. All the different subject areas. But, I see that social emotional piece as the really important foundation and the kids that have it already, they have it, they’re already on their way for kindergarten. They’re all in pretty good shape. I do my best to challenge them, to get them to think more independently and move beyond some of the lower levels. I can only do my best. I try to provide opportunities for children to practice.

I asked Annie how she prepares differently for children that she feels have the social and emotional piece in place and children that may not have that in place.

I try to arrange learning opportunities for children. Now, some of the things that happen naturally, I feel, is really the way that they learn, because the child's interest is what's gonna really drive their learning. Yes, you have a lesson and you have something presented to the whole group. Some of them are gonna engage, some of them aren't. So, if you can find out where their interests lie, that's where you can get real learning to happen. So, the main challenge for me over the years has been doing that, trying to reach all of them. 'Cause you have 15, 16, 18, sometimes 21 I had one year. You can't really get to each one of them, you know? You try and you hope that you can get at least a group. You can at least get a group. And then a maybe another groups is like, "All they do is they play. Well they are babies," but for them, it's learning to know that it's not just all about them.

They're in the social atmosphere, and that's the, my whole portfolio when I did my masters, the main point was learning how to be in the world because we're born and we're all so ego-centric. So, in many senses, for those young children who really haven't had
those experiences, I become like that mother for them, and I've had kids follow me
around like little puppy dogs. So, that's where they are developmentally. So, their main,
my goal for them is learn that they can be autonomous in the world, they can explore
their environment and they're still safe.

So, a child learning in their safe environment and that learning is accessible to them and
that they can succeed, they can succeed and they can learn. So, knowing, they have to know
that I'm there to support them no matter what. No matter if they are on the floor screaming,
pulling their hair, banging their head on the wall because they can't self-regulate that Annie
is there for them. End of story. To any length and beyond. That’s my most important role.

Annie’s response to this question left me reeling. She was very struck with emotion to
tears when she thought about the experiences of children outside of the classroom. It seemed
there were two parts that Annie was highlighting. The responsibility to prepare young children
for kindergarten rests on teaching them science, literacy and mathematics, but her real work
seemed to lie in teaching children how to get along in the world. She preferred to engage in a
relationship with them that was a series of questions and answers to not one of right and wrong.
Annie achieves this through setting up her room in centers, asking questions and reinforcing the
academic information.

So, I'm at, usually it's not like I'm sitting there [ at centers]. I just keep coming, try to
touch base. I’ll have something like a floor activity, so at the beginning of the year when
we do Handwriting Without Tears, I'll have Mat Man, that's a song, and there is a
particular way that you do it, but you see the kids manipulating the materials and being
creative, too. So, they're learning the concept of one and two.

Annie sang the song as she would with children in her class.

Mat Man has "two eyes, two eyes, two eyes". So, they're counting one, two. So, they're
getting that practice concept of two. Two hands, two feet. So, there's something for them
to learn in each of the centers. So, sensory play. The basic centers, my learning centers
include dramatic play- There's always dramatic play. If there's not dramatic play open,
there would be something children could engage in dramatic play that's not the whole
center, like it might be dollhouse.

So, then the kids that don't know about that are exposed to that. So, science. And then math
ties in there, too. Patterning. Table toys are usually a choice. And a focus for them. It may
have like a main focus, like some of the math concepts are like positional, so positional
words or same and different. Basic counting. So, they're doing their work and then I ask a question that gets them to think about whatever concept. "Oh, I noticed you put the white block on the top." And then they have the yellow, "Where are you gonna put that one?" "I'm gonna put it behind." So, then they put it behind. "Yeah, so you put it behind it." So, they're hearing it again. So, that's reinforcing them.

It was becoming clear that Annie was comfortable and skilled at embedding academic reinforcement through games and through her relationship with children. I was beginning to wonder how she prepared children on an individual basis. I asked Annie if she could share a story about how she prepares children for kindergarten.

Definitely, so, we do some more kind of modeling, more cookie cutter type things with learning how to write letters. So, the Handwriting Without Tears program, something I've utilized and I've found it really useful. And then the kids are learning their letter sound associations, introduced letters. We have a PreK team here, there is an order and a pace that we introduce letters. So, they're learning those letter sound associations, and they start to naturally use them in their writing. They start usually with drawings and then you see random letters, you see that development. That's one of the most exciting things. Learning to read and learning to write, to me.

It's like, I had a kid that said, "Are those Amy's boots?" My boots were down at, 'cause I had been down at the preschool outside ... I said, "Did you ... what did you say ... Amy's boots?" I'm like, "Yeah! Amy's boots!" So, that's the way I see reading and writing. I just get really excited about that and the kids love to share with their parents and the parents are like, "Wow, did he do that?" Like, "Yeah, he did. He did that." So, that is a great springboard to kindergarten where they're gonna start to do a lot more writing. So, of course a goal would be to try to keep their sustained attention when they're on task.

Annie speaks easily about the academics, but, they are secondary to her excitement that a child connected an experience of recognition of her boots; a connection. Exploring this more with Annie, I asked, “how do you make that connection with and for young children, from the experience to the writing?”

If a child is involved in an activity and they're ... they look like they're almost gonna be done and I feel kind of sure, I might come over and ask them to tell me about it. "What else did he do, your brother? What else did he do?" "Oh, he fell down and my mom got him a Band-Aid and he wouldn't stop crying. And he wanted the polka dot one but she said he couldn't." "Oh, wow. Maybe you could tell, maybe you could draw a picture on there." And then they're like, "Oh, yeah." So, then, just trying to, and that's a challenge,
because in a busy classroom, you can't always catch all the things. But that would be one way. Maybe share something that happened to me.

For Annie, making these connections seemed to be very much based in talking it through with children. We began to think about how that carries on for the child in kindergarten. I asked Annie, “what would you tell a Kindergarten teacher about how you prepare a child in prekindergarten?”

If someone said, "How well do you think so-and-so is prepared for kindergarten?" I can say, "Well, geez, they know how to attend to a story and they can re-tell me some things from a story. They understand the beginning, the middle, and the end. They know the problem. They know that there are some books that are about science and there is no story, they're just learning about things. They know that their life experience can connect to story. They can share with you about how, what they know or have done that connects." That's where it breaks my heart, where these kids, they don't have experience. They sat in front of the TV or I don't know what they did. Did they get put under a rock? That breaks my heart. But, I won't go off on that too much. [Annie reaches for the tissue in her pocket]. But I'm saying that they just have this long way to go and hopefully they have good teachers and they just, 'cause some kids just go like this in development, because their brains are capable and they just haven't had the experience, you know? And then it's funny, because there are some kids that you try so hard to prepare them. They're just not getting, there's just something. They're just not getting the letters, and there's ... at the end of the year, it can turn into for me more rote, and I don't like to teach that way. I really don't like the flash cards and stuff like that. I try to do some, make some games. But really when it comes to recognition of a symbol, you gotta repeat it. You gotta see it, gotta repeat it.

Now, I do that in the classroom all the time naturally so that they can build on that, so that at the end of the year, I'm not doing the rote. "I see you have eggs. Look it's a big E. E, your name's Evan. You start with E, too, right? Look, E." So, there it is, E. And it's October. So, by June, he knows E.

Well, it might be in dramatic play. That might be ... they're playing with vehicles and they have a stop sign. "Stop. S-T-O-P. I know that. My mom said that's a stop sign." So, that happens naturally because it's their world. Environmental play. They see McDonald's, they know M. They learn that naturally because kids learn naturally. They want to learn.

Annie moves easily among the ideas of preparing a prekindergartner for kindergarten through real world experiences, conversation with her as the teacher, and reinforcement through
interests. From Annie’s response, it was clear that she had not actually ever had a conversation with a kindergarten teacher about how she prepares a child to transition into kindergarten. Annie is almost uninterested in exploring that. We move back to how Annie instructs to support emotional competence. She quickly emphasized that while learning letters in a natural environment will happen, “the social piece” that young children need as the basis for Kindergarten preparation. She explains through a scenario she enact through her voice:

"The next time when I tell you,” and I'll just use the example of clean up, "I tell you we're gonna clean up in a few minutes, you need to be ready, because when you get angry and you throw scissors, that's scary and it's dangerous. And I got really angry when you did that. So, I need you to really try to think about that and be ready next time." So, those are those things. It's so much that social piece, it's amazing. So, I think that a lot of kids catch up with the academic piece, but if they don't have that how to be in the world, connect with others, be fair, be respectful, it's gonna be a lot harder road, and they develop that early on. That's, who they become happens ... the root of or the base, I can't think of how to put it. Their personalities, and their values start early on, you know.”

I could see Annie grappling with how to explain how she seeks to prepare prekindergarten children for kindergarten in academics starting with the social and emotional domain. She continues,

They really like to learn their names, so focus on their names ‘cause that's so closely tied to their identity. For a letter recognition, that would be a good one. And then it branches out into connecting with others. Like, "Oh, look. His name starts with A just like yours. Look! How many letters do you have? I only have three letters and he has ..." So, they're comparing. It's just, those things happen in children's world. They just do it.

The block center, they're building. They made a square building. And if they don't know square, you can help them learn it by sitting down and playing with them. That's really what I wish I had more time to do, sit down in the block center and play with them.

Annie moves naturally in our conversation to the idea of play.

Sit down in the block center and play with them, yeah. Dramatic play and more” sit back” in dramatic play, or fill in and engage with me, but I don't like to be the center, I just like to be in there in the mix. When they're ready, I scaffold-
I think there's a lot of transitions. There's a lot of challenges with our schedules because there's so much that we have to try to pack in. That's where my first two years were different. So, in that setting, it was, there was a bigger chunk. I've always had first lunch. So, we had breakfast and it's almost 10:30 and then our outdoor time is quarter of 11:00. Then we go, we're outdoors, we have lunch, so then I have to try to do, I have done shorter center times in between there, if I can get them to come in. They're supposed to eat right off the bat, but then parents are bringing them late. Those children aren't having the experience of our morning meeting. That's essential, essential to that development of sense of belonging.

They need to have that, because that makes them safe and a part. So, that's a real challenge. I'm all about specials, but it's just a lot. I really feel like ... being together in a space for that play, because that's how children learn, you need a chunk of time. Some kids take almost half an hour to get into their play. They start out, they have to get in the mix. They're shy. They start playing a little bit, it's clean up time, and they're on a roll. And I feel bad for them. 'cause I'm like, setting the timer.

Annie’s voice went much lower than it had up until now. We talk more about the impact of schedules on play. She continued is a very strong, low voice:

At the beginning of the year, those transitions take a long time. There are strategies I use for that. I model how we line up. I call children to show, model. I use some of that responsive classroom. "I noticed you got right behind him today. That's exactly what we do. You did a great job today lining up. I like the way your hands are down at your sides. You remembered."

[Basically,] I have typically two chunks of time that I can do center time and one of them is right before rest, so it's not optimal for young children, because the youngers and even some of, depending on our own body, our own physical needs, they're ready to rest. So, those challenges, the social challenges, negotiating for a turn. They're getting interrupted to go use the restroom because they're gonna lay down for a rest and you don't want them to have an accident. So, those are challenges, yeah.

I might actually address the scheduling thing. We're adding in art. I love that, but I almost feel like the art teacher could rotate into the classroom, because it's an extra transition. We really waste in this school, waste time transitioning.

I love that we're eating in the classroom. I couldn't stand the cafeteria. It was a zoo. And they waste time and they don't eat much and they're just not focused on eating.

I am feeling that play is important to Annie and wonder if she would use that extra time for play. What do you think extra time allows for?
It just allows for more quality learning experience because that chunk of time that a kid took 15 minutes to get into that favorite center because so-and-so had his favorite truck and he doesn't know how to negotiate, that kid's not getting enough out of that experience.

Annie looked around the room, eyes darting again from the bookshelf to me to the ground. We sat in silence for a moment longer than was comfortable. I almost wanted to ask if she thought she would address this with the administrator. But, that was not what came out of my mouth. Instead, I asked Annie how she would describe her overall experience in preparing prekindergartners for kindergarten. Annie summed it up:

Well, that's my job. It's what I do. It's my job. I mean, that's it, you know. I'm not just preparing for kindergarten, I'm preparing for life. I see, here I go again. [Annie reaches for the well-used tissue].

We're the first people. I don't even see it as preparing for kindergarten. I see it as preparing for life. For some of these kids, our relationship with them can make a huge difference, because they may have been in a situation, their lives thus far, they've been living in a situation where there's no one even really available, because the mom's distracted and either maybe doesn't have a husband or maybe just can't get a job, the stresses of life.

I don't know if you're familiar with Alice Honing. She's done a lot of research about that bond. She's did some early research and I'm not really up on more recent stuff, but she said that like, I think it was either three substantial connected relationships that happen within those first five years, even if a child is beaten at home and neglected, that can, if they have that resilience piece, you know we learn about the resilience, they can go on to be whatever they want to be. So, that's how important it is. If I can be one of those people for those kids, I'm making a difference in the world, you know.

It's a lifelong process, you know.

We talk for a few minutes about our children and I see, for a brief moment, the joy I have in thinking back on the teachers that my children had and the relationship is strong.

As Annie and I finished our conversation, Annie’s body relaxed and she leaned back into the purple chair and crossed her legs. She inhaled very deeply and looked around the parents’ room. Finally, her gaze turned to me, crying but still teary. She will continue to prepare students
for kindergarten this year, but she will focus and give of her spirit to prepare them for life. As for me, I was struck by the desire of Annie to, yes, prepare young children for kindergarten through centers that involve play, a relationship with her (the teacher) and when timing for transition is upon her, move into rote memorization of letters and letter sounds. But, Annie’s focus on the undergirding work of a child’s social and emotional development to create the capacity to be in the world with others is her passion and reason for teaching.

Mary Anne: Special Education Universally Speaking

Mary Anne and I met in her classroom where she had spent the morning preparing her centers for her incoming students. I was offered an adult chair, but, not seeing one easily accessible, I declined. We both sat in prekindergarten chairs at the snack table. Mary Anne has a long history with education, but, only four-years’ experience as a certified public-school teacher. Up to four years ago, Mary Anne worked as a para professional and a long-term sub in this very school. She currently has a bachelor’s degree in Early Childhood Education with a minor concentration in Special Education. She earned her undergraduate degree in 2012. Currently, Mary Anne is working on her Master’s degree in Special Education.

As with each participant, I queried Mary Anne as to how she became interested in teaching prekindergarten. Mary Anne exclaimed,

“I have wanted to be a PreK teacher since I was in PreK! [The special education teachers here] were my PreK teachers when I was in PreK. I used to go home and play school a lot, and there was never any doubt in my mind that I wanted to be in early childhood.”

I asked, “Early Education specific to PreK? Mary Anne replied that she had some doubts in High School and thought she might prefer to teach older children, but, with her student teaching in PreK she was convinced to remain in PreK and, because there was an opening in this
school at the time she was looking for work after graduation. We were getting more comfortable with each other now and I began to look around her classroom. She followed my glance. Mary Anne’s room was in total disarray, understandably so, as she toyed with the idea of changing her dramatic play center to where her writing center was currently. Items displayed neatly on the sink platform as she emptied the contents of her writing center so it could be easily moved. Dramatic play looked as though children could enter the center and begin to imagine themselves cooking dinner right away; still intact from the year before.

There was a palpable difference interviewing in a classroom compared to interviewing in the parents’ room. Everything in Mary Anne’s room was child sized except for the large rocker that sat at the corner of the rug that marked space for morning and afternoon meeting. Light was pouring in and a slight odor of bleach was in the air, begging notice of the child sized toilet and sink that linked her room with a neighboring kindergarten room. Inviting Mary Anne to talk about her overall experience in teaching young children she smiles broadly. Looking around the room, quiet for a few moments, Mary Anne begins to describe her experience from a positive point of view.

It’s been positive, I think. I like making the impacts and seeing the growth from the start of the year to the end of the year, especially when they’re getting ready for kindergarten. I encourage Mary Anne to continue by asking, can you share how you make the impacts?

Well, there is a huge difference developmentally, even between the three-year-old’s and the four-year-old’s. The four-year-old’s just feel more mature and really have that desire to learn. Whereas I find that with a lot of the three-year-old’s, they’re still getting the social skills and how to act in school. Then, I find in the second year with the four-year-old’s, they’re super motivated to learn all they can. Like last year, I had one student who really wanted to learn how to read. Her mom was a kindergarten teacher, and she really wanted to learn what mom’s students did. We started with sight words and reading, but, I took a lot of my cues from her, because I didn’t want to make it something that felt like work.
There was a similar thought in Annie’s interview about preparing young children for kindergarten by engaging the interest of children. Mary Anne talks about preparing young children in terms of interest and fun, too, but adds the dimension of ensuring that the academic work doesn’t feel like work. Mary Anne continued to describe what she meant by impacts by telling a story about twins in her class.

It was actually really interesting because she this child was a twin, and her twin sister, they were both at the same level academically, but, her twin sister was more interested in the center time and the playing, and I could get skills from her, but it had to be in the play setting, whereas her twin sister wanted to be sitting at my small group table all day every day, doing sight word games and writing and she liked to write names of the kids in the class and practicing her letters and telling me math facts. It’s just interesting, the two different groups. The one twin was more social and into the playing. She’d run over to see what we were doing, but she never sat with us and really worked with us.

Mary Anne’s experience of having children at a table and interacting with her about discreet skills in literacy was still coupled with games but considered working. In the setting where her sister was playing, Mary Anne did not consider that working, but found she could still “get skills”. Mary Anne found the twins to be both academically prepared. To tease this idea out and explore more deeply, I asked Mary Anne to tell me a story about a time when she really felt as though she prepared a child for kindergarten. Mary Anne took several seconds to respond.

For my kids that I find are really high academically, I’ll actually go to the kindergarten teachers and get the kindergarten assessments and do those assessments with the kiddos and see where they are, and then maybe design some tier two interventions I might work with them on. Even just in general as a whole in the classroom, you’re giving them the social skills and the sense of community that they would need in K. I do a lot of differentiating at my literacy and math and art centers, where I might have one activity out, but there’s five different things that you could do with it. I might walk over and suggest a specific task that I think that they’re ready for and that they would need in K. I do a lot of observations and notes.

Mary Anne’s brief reference to the social belonging aspect of how she prepares a child for kindergarten is vastly different compared to Annie’s emphasis on developing the social and emotional areas of competence for prekindergartners. Differentiation in the curriculum is a
primary focus of Mary Anne as she thinks about how to prepare prekindergartners at varying levels. Mary Anne’s experience with special education begins to surface. I noticed that Annie had little discussion about differentiation. Mary Anne and I explored more fully. I asked her what she would share with a K teacher about preparing PreK children for K to better understand.

Well, I feel like I would use a lot of data. I really like data, even just looking at our assessment profile card and showing the skills, because those are all skills that we want them to have to go to K. I first really focus on those skills, and then if I find that they’re exceeding in them, then I would bring in the K skills. I would show the teacher that and then give them a brief about behavior and social skills, because those are all things that involve the learning.

I found it interesting that Mary Anne would use the hard assessment data as point of reference for the kindergarten teachers, yet, the social skills and behavior would be a verbal brief. It was the brief about the social skills that had me wondering with Mary Anne about she felt her preparation for kindergarten was going. Mary Anne’s smile left her face and very deliberately began to talk about he last year class.

Last year I had a really tough year, behavior, and I think that there could even be three or four kids that have those really strong behaviors, and they take over your whole classroom environment. You have to really think about the interventions and staying positive and really helping to support those kids while teaching all the students empathy and sense of community and school awareness. I just think it’s so important that you get that.

A few behaviors I had last year were, there’s a lot of bolting from the room. If we were transitioning from a preferred activity like recess to a less preferred, it was a lot of dropping, and I would need to stay with the student while my classroom para or a recess aide brought the rest of my kiddos in. That was bringing the attention to the student, and I feel like the kids pick up on the energy, too, or even behaviors like if he was at dramatic play center and another friend took the plate he wanted. Instead of me bring able to go over and talk, he would either start throwing things or just completely shut down. You wouldn’t be able to get through.

We really had to get control over that before we could work on the academic pieces that would be needed in kindergarten, because frustration would bring out his behaviors.
Mary Anne’s raw description of children’s behavior as central to being able to learn made me understand the challenges that she faced during last year. It was beginning to occur to me that asking about preparing for kindergarten brought to mind the idea of being able to read, write and do some mathematics, but the conversation continues to circle around to how the first challenge is to bring young children to a level of behavior. Mary Anne seemed to really consider for a moment before she answered my question about how she managed the rest of the year with this child.

He made small jumps. I did a token economy system where he loved dinosaurs, so I had pictures of dinosaurs and I work, have you heard of the motivator? [I nodded]. Every three minutes, even if he was in the middle of a tantrum, but he was staying in one spot on the floor and he wasn’t hurting any friends, I would say to him, I like how you’re being safe with your body. Even if it wasn’t a desired behavior, I had to pick up on something positive and give him the dinosaur, and once he earned five, which would happen in 15 minutes, then he could earn a walk or time on the tablet or a specific preferred activity. We actually had to do away with the walks after a while, because he always wanted it to be me and him, and I couldn’t be leaving the class every 15 minutes. We had sticker chart for him, too, and he made progress. It was very slow progress, but, it was something.

Digging deeper with Mary Anne, we talked about the idea that this child always wanted it to be Mary Anne and him for the walks. I couldn’t help but recall Annie’s thoughts about the importance of the teacher and student relationship in her mind. Connecting to her first responses, I thought Mary Anne had little emphasis in her strategies placed on domains other than cognitive. That soon shifted as she continued to discuss preparing prekindergartners for the academic demands of kindergarten.

I think at each spot, there's a limit to how many kids can go there, and I think having that small group is really, like that small little group of friends that you're working with is really helpful. I do whole group, but to have 18 kids sitting in one kids with 18 different behaviors and there's a lot of fidgeting, you don't get a lot of great learning out of that.
I was startled again at the description of children as behaviors. However, Mary Anne seemed comfortable using that description. Working in small groups is how Mary Anne seems to find prekindergartners learn, ideally. Having children in small groups. It makes us think about what are children learning. I ask, “if you were to think about children learning at the centers, what are they learning?”

I would say at centers like blocks and dramatic play, they're learning a lot of social skills and role playing. I've actually, it's actually one of my goals this year to incorporate more literacy. I might put books over there that they can, like my dramatic play might have books about families or different jobs or communities. They could be looking through and trying to act out those roles. I also saw a great thing online where they wear a necklace with a role on it. They might wear a necklace that says mom or dad or brother or sister, so then they're picking up on those roles, so I thought that might be fun. Literacy and math, and even discovery and writing are more, they are playful and I find that the kids don't even realize that they're doing work or working really hard, because it's just fun for them.

I find that academics take over so much, and it’s important to look at the whole child, too, not just that side of them, because you could have, this past year I had a PreK student that had great academics, knew every kindergarten sight word, was rattling off math facts, but, didn’t have great social skills or wasn’t very independent. I found that for him, he already has all these great skills going into kindergarten, but what we really need to focus on is the social and the independent. I think if you sent him with just those academics, I think he’d still struggle, because he’s not, like in the morning, he’s not coming in and unpacking and putting his things away and doing our morning routine, he’s waiting for me to do it for him. Or, he’s not necessarily sitting and working collaboratively with other kids, which I think is a really big part of kindergarten and the early grades.

I think part of PreK, I’ve always said the most important thing in PreK is having a really great environment and attitude and getting the kids really excited for school. I think it’s important that that stays with them in kindergarten, because I think a negative year can have a huge impact on your willingness to go to school and your excitement. I just think all that collaboration is important. I think it’s really important to collaborate with the parents and the special ed teachers, even if the kiddo doesn’t have an IEP, I realized that the special ed teachers have a lot of really great ideas and resources. They had ideas that I never even thought of, that they’re using for special ed kids, but they can be used for a universal design for learning.
I started to understand with Mary Anne that behaviors shaped much of how her experience in the classroom was interpreted. Whether or not a child was identified as a child with a special need or disability, the universal interventions that support young children could be used with each child. While many of the children would be either playing in centers or sitting at a table doing academic work with Mary Anne, the children exhibiting challenging behaviors to the safety of themselves or others represented a large part of her experience. She continued to describe the universal design to rest on “student’s interests, the motivator to give positive attention.” Mary Anne believed that until these types of universal strategies were introduced to teachers, they wouldn’t know about them. She explained,

I think a lot of classroom teachers are so overwhelmed by the demands of running a classroom and doing the paperwork and building the positive connections. Sometimes it’s not even on their mind until they have a behavior and they feel like they’re sinking and you need something right away, whereas I feel like now that I’ve learned all those tools, they might be something that I implement earlier, while again, you still have that really positive connection.

We ended our time together with Mary Anne talking about her desire to have each and every child prepared for kindergarten. In conversation with her building administrator, Mary Anne derives solace when she let her administrator know that she felt some of her children are not yet ready, academically, for kindergarten.

I talked it over with my administrator and she said “that is the reason why we have the SRBI or collaborating with your peers. It was important to get SRBI started early so then you can have that continuum and that alignment with the kindergarten teacher, and they can be working on that too right away when the student comes in.”

Mary Anne seemed to feel better about this with her administrator’s explanation.
Dionne: Developmentally Appropriate Despite Perceptions of “Just Playing”

Dionne was eager to participate in this study and it became evident from the moment I received an email looking to get together for an interview. She requested that we meet at the local bakery for the interview. I agreed and we met at 7:45 am so that she could get to her classroom to begin to set up her centers and get organized for the upcoming year. We settled into an isolated two top table with a cup of coffee for me and a cup of hot tea for Dionne.

Dionne had been a prekindergarten teacher for twelve years and had no intention of going into a different grade, although, she would like to pursue her administrator’s certificate in the next few years. Dionne had her Master’s degree in Elementary Education and let me know that teaching children aged three to five years old is, “definitely” her niche. Dionne has always loved children and described her experience as a baby sitter as beginning the moment she passed her first aide course at the local library. She declared, “I have been babysitting forever, and for a long time I wanted to be a pediatric nurse.” But after spending a great deal of time in the hospital as her grandmother died, it became harder for her to see sick people, and especially sick children. Teaching young children was her next option.

Introducing ourselves to the topic of preparing prekindergartners to transition to kindergarten, I asked Dionne her what her experience had been preparing young children for kindergarten. She felt it strongly, much as Mary Anne and Annie did.

It’s amazing to think back to when I was a child, and the expectations that teachers had on me, I look back to kindergarten, for me, and kindergarten today is so much more than it was. And, the expectations on children are that much higher, so I feel as though our job in PreK has been given more of an importance, because we are preparing them for Kindergarten, which I joke with people that PreK is what kindergarten was, and kindergarten is what first grade was, and on and so forth.

I encouraged Dionne to explore that in more detail. “How have you experienced that [as a teacher]?” She answered,
I look back to when I was in preschool or nursery school, and it was a lot of play based, just social skills and it still is, but there is still those academic expectations that you get them to know their letters and sounds that they make, and recognize numerals and understand story structure, and all these things that were just a blip back in the 80’s and 90’s. Even in the beginning when we first opened, I don’t know if there was such a demand put on [Dionne slams her clenched fist into the palm of her other hand], letter ID as an example. You go to kindergarten and you should at least know all your letters. And, in the beginning [when the school first opened], I don’t think we put as much pressure on that. It goes against what I believe.

We are in a local coffee shop that is located in a community from which the school has few families in attendance. We share a smile as she tentatively looks around.

In my opinion, letter sounds are even more important to help with reading. That’s the ultimate goal in kindergarten, to get them to be reading. The more they are familiarized with letters in PreK, I feel as though they’re better prepared to be able to put those sounds together and look at words and know that putting them all together makes a word.

Dionne felt strongly about what she believed to be true. I was struck by Dionne’s conviction in her voice and in her face about how to teach children how to read. I somewhat expected it as Annie described her passion for teaching young children because of a more justice perspective. I asked, “Can you share a time when this difference [preparing for sounds before letter identification] shaped your experience in preparing a Prekindergartner for kindergarten?”

Dionne thought through her response identifying that she went through a process of comparing children in their academics. She offered,

What am I doing differently for child A versus child B? Where is child A struggling, but, child B has got all their letter identification done, they know the sounds that they make, maybe minus vowel sounds, they’re recognizing their name in print, they’re recognizing their friend name in print. So, what is...but they were both in my class for two years, what did I do differently? Or, not differently, for those two children? That plays a big part in my thought process, when looking at children, getting them ready for kindergarten.

I had been mulling over and looking at my notes taken during my interview with Annie and Mary Anne. In both cases we discussed what they would tell a kindergarten teacher. In
retrospect, both Annie and Mary Anne seemed more guarded in discussing the transition as it related to kindergarten teachers. But, Dionne went to that point early in our interview. And, I found that she carried with her throughout the interview a deep understanding of the place of preparing prekindergartners for kindergarten in the system of education. She began by using her voice to describe how we forget the experience of the child.

They’re so little, and I feel a lot of times in the position I’m at with other teachers that I speak to, they forget that these...this is that child’s first experience at school. They’re coming in and they may be three, but they’re really like late two’s. And to expect those high demands on these children is a lot. Because I mean at the Pre-K level I still can get my academic pieces in through their play. I can set up my block center to help with you know different skills and I can do the writing table. I can set it up so that they’re practicing writing letters and words and names. And unfortunately, I think as the years go on there is less of that free exploration of academic skills and more "Here's your worksheet. Here's what you gotta do."

Dionne breathes deeply and I am putting together that she is aware that she brings a level of accountability to the work of preparing young children. She continued,

I try really hard to give them the beginning of the year to get settled. To understand the routine of the classroom, to make friends, to do a lot of those social skills. By mid-year, by the beginning of the new year, February, it starts to be more prominent in my mind where, oh, you know what? Jimmy is still struggling, and he’s still having trouble with this and that. So mid-year. And I definitely, because of the experience I have with the two-year program, I feel strongly that the first year is so important and just having social skills. Playing with peers, problem solving. And, so if I have a student that ends the year, I don’t want to say the word struggling with academic skills, but not as far along as I would want them to be. I try to go about it in different facets. So, I do it visually. We'll introduce letters the good old fashioned, here's the letter A card. I introduce the sound along with the letter, and the I am a strong believer in a lot of tactile, so I like working with sand and shaving cream and I like dry erase boards. Kids really seem to excel at those 'cause then they can erase it and write it. So, I like having a writing table where kids can go with cards that they can copy. Yeah. So, I try, and then I try to look at what the child's interested in. So, I can try to match that with what they're interested in. So, if they're interested in animals, I can sit with them and associate the letters with an animal, and then maybe they can make that connection. Because that might help them have it stick.
Dionne’s first statement was intriguing, and I wondered if that was something a kindergarten teacher would be interested in knowing about. I inquired as to what she might tell a kindergarten teacher about preparing a prekindergarten child for K? Dionne continued to talk about this as both a professional transfer of information, but, also, something deeper. Something that seemed to annoy her as person and professional.

So, if I know the K teacher and say they’re getting a child [from Dionne’s class] I would definitely give them a background of what I’ve learned from my experiences working with that student. I think that’s really helpful, giving the teacher an insight into that child, ‘cause you might have a child that’s really shy and I can warn that...not warn, but I can let the teacher know, you know what? It might take her a while to open up to you but if you talk to her one on one versus in a group, she might give you more answers.

I would tell them what we were doing at the PreK level. How we’re working with different curriculum activities and what kind of standards we’re working, on or what concepts we’ve been working on. And see if they’re aligned with the K teacher. That’s where a lot is...some is disconnected. It’s like we could be working on something and K teachers will be like,’ oh, okay. Well, we don’t touch on that. Or, oh good, ‘cause we expect them to already know that before they get to us.’. Same with numerals. So, we’ve adjusted our teaching standards to meet that, even though, in my opinion, it may not be developmentally appropriate.

This idea of being perceived as, “less than” by a colleague also rang true for Dionne in another way. I had not considered at all that families perceive a PreK teacher as a glorified babysitter. But, Dionne was clear.

I’ve often heard that, you know, when talking about PreK, it’s not held to as high of a standard because some parents just look at it as babysitting and look at is as “well, my kid’s just there for the day to play.” And, what they don’t realize is all the background that we’re doing and that we too have expectations because our expectations are based on what is gonna happen year after year after year after year. We’re the foundation that’s built upon, so, yes, you think as a parent that you’re just dropping your kid off from 9:00-4:00 to play and have fun and to be with people when in reality, yes, all those things are true, but, they’re also learning a multitude of skills. So, and I would hope, my hope would be that admin would have that mentality, but, I also fear that admin also has their demands put on them from above and that unfortunately although they would love to see that in a K classroom there’s also a push to get the skills necessary to move onto first grade.
Dionne looked at me again. I got a sense that she was confident in her voice for young children, but, it was complicated by having colleagues who were telling her what she should be doing. We explored further, I asked, “can you share what you think would be appropriate?”

Well, I think that the academic goals of letter id and letter sounds and that, it’s important, but it’s not the be all, end all. And I would rather have a student go to kindergarten, being able to sit, do their job, communicate well, play nicely with their peers, solve their problems. I would rather have that kind of student go forward. And, if they’re a little bit behind in knowing that C-A-T spells cat, I’m okay with that. But, the demand continues. So, from K to first, first to second with testing and all of this, it’s just expected that these kids know more and they’re not allowed to be kids in my opinion.

Dionne’s face becomes pinker and the thickness in the air is palpable. Here is a teacher that wanted to be a nurse and turned to teaching instead. She felt the pressure to prepare children with academics which she will do only if developmentally appropriate.

At the PreK level, I still can get my academic pieces in through their play. I can set up my block center to help with, you know, different skills and I can do the writing table. I can set it up so that they’re practicing writing letters and words and names. And, unfortunately, I think as the years go on there is less of that free exploration and more, ‘Here’s your worksheet, here’s what you gotta do.’ There are K teachers that are trying to move away from that [worksheets] kind of drill and kill mentality.

There is definitely a division. You know there’s the PreK teachers and K teachers and we have our own grade level meetings and they have their one grade level meetings. And, we have staff meetings, but, we don’t really ever have meetings where I can sit down and talk to his teacher about this prospect. So, I think time plays a huge role. And, the I think it’s important as a PreK teacher to stay as up to date as possible with what are the expectations of K students. Like revisit the common core and see what we are aiming for. We [PreK teachers] have over time and especially we’ve looked at our own standards [Early Learning Development Standards, ELDS] and it’s been like “Okay, you know what? We’re aiming for this, but that’s not a developmentally appropriate practice so we’re gonna get down on this, but, oh we’ve never touch on this. We really need to start focusing more on that. But, we are a voice for PreK and if it isn’t developmentally appropriate, I won’t do it. But, then also talking with K teachers and having those conversations like you know, “I know your students are expected to score this on their developmental reading assessment. How do you think we can help? Do you have some strategies that we could use to help you get there? More communication, I think, is the key. There’s not enough.
I inquire, “have you been able to have a conversation like that with a K teacher?”

I’ll be honest with you, it’s difficult timing wise to get a lot of that conversation going with K teachers. I think it would be a big benefit. And I’m at a unique situation in my job where for the past let’s say at least five years my pod situation has been all PreK classrooms. So, in the past when I first started I was on the outside. My classroom and then the other classroom and in the middle, was a kindergarten class and that’s the typical model at this school and I was able to sit down and talk with the K teacher a lot more about what they were doing, but, since that change has happened it’s been difficult because I don’t have a core K teacher to go to.

Our time is beginning to wind down and I asked Dionne what she would share with an administrator about preparing a child for kindergarten.

I think it’s important that an administrator understand that it’s not all about that bottom line of what academic skills they [prekindergartners] know and that it’s important for us as PreK teachers to look at the child as a whole. And, that you know I’m looking at how they’re solving their problems with their peers. Are they hitting, are they pushing or are they saying to a friend, “I don’t like that when you do that” or coming to me and asking for help to solve a problem. It’s also about those self-help skills. Are they going to the bathroom by themselves, are they cleaning up after themselves or am I constantly reminding them? It’s just more a whole picture of the child. Not just on paper they know 24,26 letters and they can identify 10 out of 10 numerals and they can count to 100 and boom, boom. It’s not just a report card, it’s not just an on-paper kind of thing. My students are my students as a whole.

Later in our interview, Dionne expressed the idea that K and PreK teachers could do a better job talking with each other. When exploring further,

I mean, I think unfortunately, I think that there is some downplaying what PreK teachers do from the K aspect. That’s a feeling that I often get. You know, I’ve overheard K teachers say, “oh well, I would never teach PreK or you know...that puts a wedge between us. You don’t often hear it the other way necessarily. And, I’ve said I feel like as soon as you make that leap to K it changes. It becomes more hyper focused on the academics and less focused on the child.

And, I mean, how are they [K] spending their day? I have this picture of what I think I would see. I feel like there are times when I walk into a classroom and everybody’s productive. And you know, you’ve got your reading group over there and you’ve got four kids on computer and you’ve got four friends doing a math lesson. Paper and pencil and cutting. When I go in, I just don’t feel the energy as I would in a PreK classroom. I wish I would feel it more. I assume it’s because teachers of K have been sucked into that ‘I gotta get the scores right. I’ve gotta get them testing right because in first grade its gonna get
harder and then second grade’s gonna get even harder.’ It’s socially more acceptable for that [play] to happen in the PreK classroom than the K classroom.

It occurred to me that Mary Anne had little opinion about how others view prekindergarten, but Annie and Dionne felt the opposite.

Ruby: Social Supports in PreK and Academic Supports in Kindergarten

Ruby was the first volunteer to participate in this study. She chose to meet in her classroom at school one and one half before school started. Currently her eleventh year of teaching, we began our discussion with Ruby’s description of her career. Ruby described her career as having taken her to teach in Atlanta, Georgia, Florida and in Connecticut. Her range of experience spanned prekindergarten to First Grade. Ruby also explained that she worked as a literacy coach for prekindergarten teachers using the Opening the World of Learning (OWL) curriculum. Ruby credited her love of prekindergarten with seeing the children grow over the year.

Exploring her perspective on that growth as she prepares transitioning prekindergartners, Ruby shared a story about how she prepared a child for kindergarten. Ruby thought for a moment as she looked around the room. She began to tell the story of five-year-old twins, a boy and a girl, in her class that illustrated for her how she prepared prekindergarten children for Kindergarten. Their birthday was after the cutoff date, in January and their parents wanted them to be in kindergarten. They had been with Ruby the year before and the parents believed their children would be wasting their time in PreK for another year. Steven, the little boy, had been diagnosed with autism and Kayla, the little girl was typically developing. Steven’s social skills landed at the level of a two and half year old. Kayla was on a PreK level, she was not as advanced in her academic skills as Steven was, although the parents believed otherwise.
Ruby described the support she gave to Steven as preschool support when referring to his behavior and kindergarten support when referring to academics. This coined for me a way of thinking that was different from how I had ever thought previously. Ruby explains,

So, there was no way he [Steven] was ready for kindergarten. I had to really up my work with him here and make sure I was challenging him academically [because of his advanced academic standing], but socially, emotionally, he needed the support of a PreK classroom. I suggested that the children go to a K classroom for literacy block to challenge them.

I queried further, “but, Kayla was typically developing, why did she leave to go to a K classroom? Ruby let me know it was because the parents were insistent that she could handle the academics.

He [Steven] was on a kindergarten level academically. She was on a PreK level. She was your very typical...She wasn’t advanced or anything. I think the parents thought that she was. We had the meeting with both the K teachers and both reported out about their [the children] progress. Both of them said what I said, that although Steven is reading great, he is still socially not really ready for kindergarten. Not only that, but, when he would read with me, he reads so fast that it’s almost like he sees a word and memorizes it. So, when you ask him what happened or ask him anything about the text while he’s reading it, he cannot answer you. He’ll make something up. So, we recommended he [Steven] stay in preschool and get K support.

This was striking to me that both Kindergarten teachers felt the importance of ensuring that the children were socially prepared for moving on to Kindergarten. Did the K support continue all year, I wondered with Ruby about this. She continued,

It did and it was challenging for Steven, because he got so many services that he was almost over serviced. OT, PT, Speech. It was challenging for me to even work with him, because if he wasn’t in Kindergarten, he was getting services and he did sleep. He was a sleeper, and he needed his sleep, so I really couldn’t work with him during rest time. But, I pulled him whenever I could and made sure I was supporting him from there.

How were you supporting him?

I would pull K level readers for his level and I would just read with him. I knew his area of growth. He needed support in the comprehension piece so I would slow him down. ‘Let’s slow down’. I would help him with self-correction.
You mentioned that his social and emotional level was at PreK level...Ruby quickly responded to correct me:

No. I would say two. When you go back in the standards [ELDS] he was really on a two or three [year old level]. Because his problem was self-regulation, we’d work on calming skills. I would do social stories with him about steps to do when you’re upset. Using your words, a lot. Stamping your feet if you needed to. Different coping skills instead of just the meltdown or the running. He was our perfect little storm.

Ruby smiled at her description. We thought more deeply about that. What do you mean? I asked. Ruby smiled and started to describe how Steven’s behavior coupled with not feeling well and his high intelligence made it difficult to know what he would be able to handle on any specific day. We thought about how she would describe that to the kindergarten teacher he was going to be with the following year.

I'd definitely speak to his self-regulation and definitely have them get into a routine of let's get into ... How to help when you cannot calm your body down, and make sure that ... In my room, it's very routine. There's nothing that's unpredictable in our day. It's the same thing every day. He thrived in that. Making sure there's a good structure for him, even if it's not the classroom, just making sure he's in a good structured routine. And explaining that he is ... Explaining his academics. He is reading on a fourth-grade level.

Our interview moved to preparing children that were not identified with a disability or a special need.

I do a lot of games because that’s what they’re interested in. If I was doing a letter game with a small group of children, if I knew they already knew their letters, I would do sounds with them, you know what I mean? Do a sound game, up it a little. Themes So, if their mastering certain things, I just make sure I’m upping it up a little bit when I work with them. Pulling them aside. Doing separate things that are different than what I would do with a PreK kid.

It was becoming clear that Ruby structured her class activities based on what was of interest to the children. She would have those activities at a table or in centers. Ruby designed the flow of her class in a way that met most of the social and emotional needs through centers.
The only time she, “upped her game” was in the realm of academics when she would then, “pull” them aside.

Ruby talked about “touching base” with the kindergarten teacher and I ask her what she might share with a kindergarten teacher about how she prepared prekindergarten partners for Kindergarten. Ruby responded, “I’d probably just speak to wherever they are academically.” But, as she described an example of what she is going to do next week, she spoke to the idea of academics, but also, she describes the children in terms of their social capacity.

I’m already planning on talking to Tammy. She has Kayla. I’m planning on addressing that she has all of her uppercase letters, but she doesn’t have all of her lowercase letters, so she needs to work on that. She needs to work on her sounds. She might give you an attitude.

For another child, Ruby described her academics and ended with, “She’s very, very stubborn.” She continued,

It’s hard to say ‘oh, for my five-year old’s I do this for everyone’. Everyone needs something a little different, personally and academically. I would just share with them [Kindergarten teachers] things that have worked for me in the past. I would definitely share about some of the games that I do. I always try to make it somewhat of a game, if I can, because that is how they learn. They learn from play. That’s missing a lot in our Kindergarten classrooms.

When I explored more deeply what Ruby felt might be missing in the Kindergarten classroom, I was surprised by her response. I asked, is that something that you would share if you... “Had a voice?” she interjected, looked down and smiled, finishing with, ‘naw’.

It was beginning to sound like what Dionne had said about the view of play by non-PreK teachers and families. As Dionne had mentioned the division, Ruby, seemed to indicate that prekindergarten teachers had no voice when it came to speaking to Kindergarten teachers. But, quickly, Ruby looked away and said,
I do [have a voice]. Curriculum Academy so we are writing a lot of what we are doing. We’re trying...It’s more inquiry based this year that we’re trying to lean towards, which can lend itself to a play a little bit more. But, it’s taking the children’s interests and designing your lessons and units and activities around what they’re interested in. I think any good PreK teacher would know that you try to bring play into everything as much as you can. Even transitions. All of my transitions are games...if they’re not a game, I call it a game. [We share a laugh]. So, I do feel like I have a voice in that way because I do the Curriculum Academy. And, with the kindergarten in the middle we are trying as much as an even flow with the PreK and the k as possible.

It was a conversation stopper. I prompted a bit more discussion by asking, “how, if you would, would you share this with a building administrator?”

Just that I really like the set-up of this school. It is a really unique school in that we are just PreK and K. It’s kind of what we do. I really like the setup that we have here. When the last principal was here she would ask us, ‘where do you think each child should go?’ She would try to take what we suggested into placement.

I continued by asking what she would take into consideration. Understanding that Annie values the teacher-child relationship that supports learning and Mary Anne the skills developed by working together and Ruby’s relationship to the classroom environment as the conduit for learning, I was curious about Ruby’s response to understand better how she thinks about matching children with Kindergarten teachers.

The teacher’s style, Disciplinary style, like Caren [a kindergarten teacher in the school] is very structured, so my very first year here I had someone that was a challenge. He wasn’t a huge behavior but I know she [Caren] would be good with him. If someone needs a lot of nurturing, I think of Carla [a kindergarten teacher in the school]. I haven’t really been in a whole lot of kindergarten rooms. I haven’t had time to really look. I would love to spend some time in kindergarten classrooms and see, just see how their rooms are set up. Even just looking at the work on the walls and seeing what they are doing. Just what each teacher is doing and what their style is.

What would that say to you?

If there were fun manipulatives or if it was a traditional classroom, like with at worksheet or very, very teacher directed. We were always taught in school to give the child, when you put out the materials, just give them a minute or 30 seconds to just do whatever they want to do with it first before you start your structured whatever. It frees up their mind a little, too. What are we going to do with this next?’ even just giving them that free time in
such a structured kindergarten day when everything is so laid out. It’s very different from PreK, even just that few minutes of ‘I got to sit and explore those for a few minutes.’

I could not help but wonder why this had not happened. But I remember that Dionne and Annie both mentioned that daily schedules keep them from having the time to meet with Kindergarten teachers.

Brandy: Balancing Curriculum – Paying the Price

Brandy emailed me to participate in this study as soon as she received the email. She requested we meet between the town she lived in and the school at which she worked. We decided on a meeting room at a local library in a town right in between. The reserved room is on the second floor and very quiet. Brandy began the interview by letting me know that she was fifty-seven years old and was in her ninth year of teaching. It sounded almost rehearsed as she quickly, without looking at me for a response, launched into explaining,

“This is a second career for me. I worked in hardware retail for twenty-one years, and then my hands were giving out. Parallel to this I had three children who were all diagnosed as special needs. The oldest one was PDD, pervasive developmental delays. Eight years later, we had the middle child, who I thought was fine. But, then as he got older, he ended up being diagnosed with ADD and bipolar disorder. Then the youngest was on the spectrum of mild autism. When the youngest turned 11, I realized that I was done with hardware retail. I said to my husband, ‘I want to go work in the school system.’ I was on the sub list, not as a teacher ‘cause I didn’t have the credentials, but as a para, or they call it a para professional, I was a general ed and special ed para professional because I had these creds of these kids behind me.”

I moved to comment, but, Brandi had not finished, “I ended up doing a dual degree and I finished it in three and half years, and spent my final semester solely based on the placement. I graduated in May and was hired at my school in August [nine years ago] and have been there ever since. There’s my history, [lightly, but audibly, slamming her four fingers against the table] that’s what I’m bringing to the table.”
I was more than fascinated with Brandi’s delivery of her history, very loud, concise, rehearsed. Little room for emotion. It seemed it had been rehearsed for years. She continued to let me know that she worked closely with a little girl in second grade on letter sounds. She worked with her through, “kill and drill, kill and drill, kill and drill, that’s just the way that it was. You used popsicle sticks. It was a little snap sound when you put the popsicle sticks down, so she knew if she was getting the snap, she was on!” Brandi’s sentences were clipped. Almost as if to say, “next question”, please. This confused me because of her quick response to the initial and subsequent emails were any indication of willingness to participate, I thought Brenda was excited to be there. She continued, “But then I thought and I kept on thinking when I went to college, I thought, if I could just get to these kids sooner. And, here I am. My youngest was 11 and [one day] he just got up, and got ready to school, and got out to the bus. He didn’t need me anymore. I said to my husband, “I’ve learned so much. What do I do with all of this information, now?”

Again, the clipped cadence of her sentences was very different than my earlier interviews. We look at each other and I looked quickly down at my first question.

“That sounds amazing, Brandi. So, if you had to describe your overall experience with teaching young children, how would you describe it?”

Joyful. There’s just an energy to it. Once you tap into it, you’re golden. You bring joy, and then you tap into their energy, and then you’re just kind of, like, guiding. And then you just make it to their advantage that they want to be with us. It’s an energy. It really is an energy that you tap into.

As Brandi relived a memory with her daughter’s teacher, it took me a moment to toggle between Brandi’s thoughts of how her own experience with her daughter’s teachers had impacted her style of partnering in her own career. I clarified in the moments available by asking Brandi how her memory of her daughter’s teacher had shaped how she prepared prekindergarten
children for Kindergarten. In her story, she referenced a time when the set up in her school had a Kindergarten classroom right next to her and referred to her memory.

Because I was next to Delia [the K teacher in the pod] I would go over and see things in her room that I thought were too old [meaning the things in the room were for children older than her PreK children]. I had parents who, like me when my daughter was in school, went into Delia’s room they would contact me because they were having conflicts. I think it is over their [PreK children’s] heads, but let me experiment with it. And so, I did my centers that way. I mean, this was high order thinking, three and four-year old’s, I thought, you know what? I’m undercutting them. I am selling them short. It was a failing on my part, not on Delia’s part. It was fascinating because for me, walking into her room, seeing that system and saying now, this is too old, even for kindergarten, and then just trying it. It was fascinating. I also felt if it works, the future children [in Brandy’s class], I’m not gonna have this big speed bump when they move over into Delia’s room. The key thing in preparing for Kindergarten right there, was aligning myself with Delia. The other thing was seat work. When I had my year of....

Brandy stopped short. She looked at me and almost visibly backed up in her chair. She swallowed hard and tilted her head back as though she were impacted by the thoughts on her mind. It began to occur to me that Brandi’s work with young children, anchored in such a personal commitment, was fraught with reflection on her influence on young children. It became clearer as we talked that Brandy had experienced a changing point in her career and it altered how she taught. She was influenced deeply by a Board Certified Behavioral Analyst (BCBA) in her class. Brandy had a class two years ago that held five young children with severe undiagnosed behavioral challenges. Administration had assigned a BCBA to her classroom for support.

One of the things that the BCBA specialist told me, they [children] have to earn the right to play. I’m like, oh, that hurts. It went right through my heart. They’re just children. Why do they have to earn the right to play? Play is the work of children. You know? So, I’m like...but I had to balance it. I had to bring a balance into the classroom of okay, if you do 5 minutes here, you get 10 minutes over here ‘cause I still believe in play, but, I need to see 5 minutes of you cutting and pasting.
I was beginning to really understand Brandy. Her clipped sentences, her rehearsed history and her demeanor was still reeling from a year of intense experience that shook her very practice. Once I understood that what the BCBA was striking deeply at one of her deeply held beliefs about play. I was wondering if that was for all children or for children that had behavior challenges. So, I asked her if it was for the entire class or for only the five children that were having difficulty.

She [the BCBA] told me it had to be for everybody. I could not do it for specific children. It had to be across the board for everyone. It was a very difficult year. We were already deep into the year. We had already laterally promoted someone out over Christmas vacation, and the thinking was, we don’t want to move anyone anymore. It was, you gotta work this, and I did. I worked it.

It was right there that I understood the clipped cadence, the direct stares. Brandi had given up her foundational belief and she was ready for anything that might challenge her decision to change. I asked her what it was like making those changes in her classroom. She likened the experience to healthy and unhealthy foods.

It’s a balance. I was total play. In fact, my response to that year [before the BCBA support] was to bring in more materials and more play. That was...I was only adding chaos to the classroom, like adding sugar to the situation and thinking, I just need more sugar. It was like, no, Brandi, I need more vegetables. So, I had to restructure the room so that every bookshelf is near a table so when they’re sitting, I am feeding them activities, not sugar, not play, activities. Your’ gonna sit and read a book right now for three minutes. Now, we’re gonna get up, o a movement break, ya, ya, ya, sit down again. Now, I’m gonna hand out the work and your’ gonna sit and do the work. We had people at each table, but, eventually we were able...I started with five adults, counting myself and Susan. By the end of the year, I had them all gone. I can’t tell you the growth I went through that year. So many people came to me afterward and said, ‘I thought you were gonna leave. I thought you were gonna quit.’ I almost did, three times. I stood there and said, ‘This is nuts. This isn’t education.’ But you know what? It was my education, not theirs.

That was two years ago. Since then, Brandi had set up her room in that way. She regaled me with small and rapid examples of why that set up worked. “one little student came to me and said, ‘ya know, today, you didn’t do A. You’re right. Everybody, let’s go do A. We didn’t do A.
He told me that we didn’t and we need to do that. You could just see they’d become relaxed.

You’d see it on their face, oh, yeah, I’m gonna go do A. Our discussion revisits how Brandi balances this new-found table activity work with earning play.

Centers are around the perimeter of the room, just like the grocery store. All the milk, and the eggs and the bakery, everything is around the perimeter of the store. But, then the high calorie stuff is in the middle of the store. The high calorie stuff is the stuff where I’m sitting and doing my assessments, I’m doing the lessons, I’m doing the interventions. Those are the tables. I have my little bag. Then what’s fascinating is, is as they’re at centers and playing, they’ve earned through an activity, they’ve earned to go to centers. Then, I’m calling friends over. I’m running a math lesson, then I’m calling friends over and I’ll have two that have not had a turn yet will try to come in and say, “When is it my turn?” For the vegetables. I will say, go back and play. I know you are there.

Play had become collateral for completing the table activities. Nevertheless, there was something about Brandi’s concise description that made me think it was control of her classroom that she refused to ever lose again. I ask what types of “lessons” she was doing at the table, hoping to understand what the vegetables are.

It’s like doing, like, counting from one to five. One is you take unifix cubes and you put five, one on each finger, and they’re birds flying. So, you have the children count them, make them fly and then have them land [Brandi demonstrates by waving her hand through the air]. It’s still play, but it’s guided play, and it’s not play with a peer. It’s play with a teacher, so it’s work.

I could not help but wonder if Brandi’s past experience was influencing the teaching pendulum in her practice to swing very far in another direction. However, it took some time to explore with Brandi. So, I note it down. Brandi continued,

I could be doing literacy, I could be doing art, I could be doing any of the meat and potatoes of the stuff that you would think children would sniff out and say, “oh, no. This is work. I don’t want any of this. But, you’ve couched it in such a way where, okay, I’ve sent you off to your center. Are you building? You’re building a wonderful building. Then I’ll see one of them stand up and look to see what I’m doing with the children I’m working with.

I asked Brandi if she would ever have a classroom without “lessons” again:
I had classrooms where, in fact, the first seven years, it was just play, play based, play...go play. I changed. The BCBA coming in and saying they have to earn the right to play. Those words were so foreign to me. There’s no way they can...I don’t understand this. Children play naturally. Children, you know, but she’s...I would only do assessments when it was report card time or whenever I needed that information. Now, I’m taking data all the time. I only did it three times a year. We all, just hearing the talk [other PreK teachers], it would be like, well, I don’t have to do that until March. I don’t have to do that until report cards come out. I’m like, yeah. But what I found this year, I keep like 20 sheets of assessment with their names. Taking data, taking data. So now, what do I do for the student who as al 26 letters of the alphabet? I take them to the next step. I do phonics. I had three students doing K work. During rest time, she’s not napping, come on, sit down and read this book to me.

Brandi was rapid fire with examples of how she was preparing children through assessment. It was spoken like a person that refused to ever experience again what she did two years ago. Further exploration with Brandi revealed that she was ready to stomp on any activity that could turn into a challenge where she would need additional adult assistance. She referred to the amount of daily transitions that could be possible triggers for any of the children to present behavioral challenges.

I'm working with three to four students tops at a table for maybe 30 minutes. I have to be very efficient. I don't have a lot of time because there is breakfast and there is ... Now, we're gonna go here to music. Now we're gonna go back to the classroom. We're gonna do circle. Now we're gonna do ... I'm up here. They're like little satellites spinning off and I have three over here. I only have two to a center. It keeps a nice quiet classroom. So, if something gets loud, immediately, tell me what's going on over here. It doesn't sound ... It sounds kind of cold...Can I help you? So, you're fostering the independence of if you have a problem, you can go to the peace table and fix it. If things are getting along great, you can hear it.

But, as with her colleagues, Ruby, Dionne, Annie and Mary Anne, Brandi “pulls” young children away from play to “work” toward getting ready for kindergarten.

I really stepped it up is with the students who come in who are already at goal. And so, I'm going down to the Literacy London Library. I am pulling materials and information. We used to have a literary specialist, and we don't anymore. I'm really feeling that because then I would go to them and say, "Could you please tell me what reading level they're at?" And then, I really feel that that is where I'm going above and beyond. That is where because it's great that they're at goal, but now what do I do?
And so, that's what I do. In that way, I'm preparing. Then I can write in the comments, "She is at reading level blah. She came in with all of the letters of her alphabet, so we've been doing Phonics games, onset, ending sounds, chunking." I did, for those three students, I put up a word wall. It wasn't a word wall, a sentence trip, center, where it had pictographs and words. It was like his eyes and it was a picture of eyes, and they were blue, R, and then I had word cards. These little smart people were going down there and filling it in correctly.

That is just ... Now that is a shining moment, and that's what I'm pointing to. I am through all of this work that I'm doing with intervention and assessment. Now I know these three need more from me, and now I'm preparing them 'cause it's great that they're at goal, but I want them like solid. Go in to K at a level three, bazinga, and then ... That's my shining moment right there. If anything, that's been ... And that took two years for me to develop. I was working on it last year, and then this year, I aced it.

They had things solid. What was really great was they weren't napping, and so I would call them down and say, okay, you're gonna work at this table and you're gonna do this packet. It had everything in it they needed to play a game and then fill out a worksheet. I mean, this is K. This is K, so at first, I was guiding it.

Then after about a month, I'm like, they got this. Then I would just give it to them and they did it. I thought, score. That's kindergarten. They need to go to a center, they need to play a game, and then do a packet with cutting or pasting, or whatever it takes.

How, throughout the day, how often would they do that?

“Every day at rest time. They worked for either 45 minutes, maybe an hour, and then I call them cot toys. We don't have cot toys. We have mats, but cot toys sounds better than mat toys for me. It's just zipper pencil bags, and then there's just games in there. When they finish that, see, now they could earn, right back to that earning 'cause they don't know they're earning, but you know, you did a really great job. If I found a student in that core group that worked during rest time, then I would work with them individually, so then I would come in and say okay, I saw you were ... 'Cause they feel it. If they're not with the other two or three kids, you can see. They're just like, I'm not getting this, I don't understand this, and I don't want to look stupid in front of the other two kids.”

It's pointed toward kindergarten. This was all kindergarten work. At first, the first time, they're like, "We can't read this sheet." That's okay. That's what I'm here for. I'll read it to you. Then one of them was, it would have the at family, and then the petals of the flower were all the fat, bat, so that they knew.

Even with Brandi’s desire to prepare for reading, writing and mathematics, she was not going to release the work she did to promote children’s prosocial behavior. Like Ruby, she used her centers to support children’s social development. But, during table activities, she also supported social behavior through her interactions with children.
They could help each other out so it wasn't a competition. I had one little girl that was like a competition. No. You're working as a group. You're helping each other out. Why don't you look and see if there are any other word families? Maybe Albee has the word family you're looking for. Then I was teaching her, you know, you're not trying to get the most answers. We're working as a group here to get all the answers. It's just very gentle. I'm sanding down the roughages, but I'm trying to do it so that their ego is still intact. Sometimes the child won't give up the pieces. I'll say, you know what? I'll tell the other children, "They're just not ready to share yet. Maybe tomorrow they will be, so let's go over here and do this." Then I'll tell that child, okay, here you go 'cause they did have a friend and he'll be coming in this year, too, where it was guarding and hoarding. But, he came from really deficits, so he needed those pieces. I knew, to the core of his being, he needed to run the table. It's like, okay, 'cause he has nothing in his house. So, it was like, okay, listen. He wants to explore this.

I'd have one friend say, "Yeah, but I want to." I'd say, "Let's ask him." I would say to my friend, Jay, "Can we come back later and ask?" I'd say, "Okay, he's not ready. He's just not ready." And so, let's come over. Then the child who really wanted to, I put them in charge. "Can you go pick another activity for us?" It's molding, but it's gentle. It's not like he's wrong for feeling this way 'cause then the whole table hates him. It's like, no, we don't want ... They'll even tell me. He's being very cold and prickly, or you should write a note to his mom. They're very astute. They're very astute.

I'll say, you know, and I can't tell them he's got nothing at home and so he walks in and this is Christmas land every day for him. I just say he's just not feeling ... You know, yesterday, when you didn't feel like going outside or you didn't feel like coming in?

Remember that feeling how you just didn't want to do that? That's how he's feeling right now, so let's go play. I've had other adults who have been in the room telling me, "You're too nice to them. You need to be ..." It's like there are times when I am firm, but that isn't it.

Worried about the time we had left and knowing how much Brandi changed her teaching to include more academics, I asked, what she might share with a kindergarten teacher about preparing a Prekindergartner for Kindergarten?

We prepare them to be independent workers, independent coming in and undoing their backpack independently. I've watched kindergarten where they have to take out the folder, put it in a certain spot, take the homework out of the folder, put that in a certain spot, and then move their attendance ticket, so there's like three things immediately when they walk in. Take off your coat, open your backpack, folder, homework, attendance. We're not that rigid, so I thought, okay, the most important thing would be to take your folder out and go wash your hands, maybe sign in. It's easy things, but it's like one, two three. I'm supporting their structure, but they're doing more developmentally appropriate things for five to six.

Brandi emphasized,
They’re doing the framework [Common Core]. But, I’m doing developmentally appropriate for three to fives. It's like the library has steps and ramps. PreK, it's ramps. K, it's ... But it's still accessing the program. You're still accessing the building, but you're either gonna take the ramp or you're gonna take the stairs. That's what I would tell. A lot of times, I hear from the K teachers in our building what you guys need to do. I'm sitting here. I'm like that's not developmentally appropriate. They can't count to 50. There's no way. I mean, we could do it and it's a song, A, B, C, D. It doesn't mean anything. They're not gonna really have the ... Or anything like that. It's like, well, they could come into K knowing this, that would be great. I have. During math meetings, I've said that's not developmentally appropriate. I'm gonna stop you there. Sure, I can stand up and we can all count to 50 every day. But, when you go to assess them on it in K, it's gonna fall apart. The train is gonna fall off the tracks because it's not developmentally appropriate. I would prefer that they know how to at least get to 10, and then by the end, to 20, not to 50. There's no way.

Is there any part of that you would share with an administrator?

What's developmentally appropriate, and let's look at the Connecticut ELs. Everything I do is dictated by the Connecticut ELs. What goes on in K is com core. They're on a whole different ... And so, I keep pointing to, well, let's look at ... Let's go to page 42. Look. It doesn't look like that for preschoolers. "She was absolutely right. It has to be play-based. It cannot be because we're basically ... We are predominantly PreK." There is K and I'm all for working to getting them ready for K, but they're still in PreK. I'm gonna guard the door. I'm gonna guard the gate and say, you know. They're so malleable. They will sit there and listen to whatever I say. I have to make sure that everything I say is of value, that they're gonna pick it up. I really, I'm conscious of their time. I only ... There's so many interferences with my time with them that I really have to make sure that everything I do is quality.

I'm constantly reviewing where did I fail, where did I do well, but where could I have tightened it up? That was that whole bringing everything in a bag. It was I'm wasting too much time looking for materials.

But I do that every day.

I have. When I have the meetings, 'cause we have two meetings, and they ask about your progress. When you think of a lesson, but then also when you look at the class globally. Like this year, I was talking to Andrea about those three students that I got materials, I used rest time, and the assistant admin said that was a fabulous idea. You used rest time, absolutely.

Clearly impacted by her experience two years ago, Brandi continued that she would share with an administrator about needing experts in Scientific Research Based Interventions (SRBI) process to ensure teachers get a hold on what children in their class may need for support.

But there were times when it was just special ed, and the teachers, and it was as strong as whoever had the best suggestion. But basically, there should be, and I'm thinking of
bringing this to two of the SRBI because I think that very often, they walk in and you can see they're upset, the teacher. They're so frustrated and this child is trashing the room, and they just want it to stop. And so, they feel that when you say, while you're doing this, it's like you're adding logs to their load, and that's not ... I'm trying to alleviate the load. I'm trying to make your load lighter. I've even ... Going through what I went through with the BCBA, I went down and talked to one of the teachers this year and said have you thought of this? She's like getting upset. It's just, the ego was in the way. If there was a way that the administrator could just convey without ...

Before you've encountered this child, and you're so frazzled, and you want to quit three times a day just to say did you look at how your room is structured? Did you look at ... You know what? When that happened to me and she came in, I just kept thinking it's me. I'm the common denominator in this room. I have 18 kids. Some are behaving and some aren't, so it's me. I really had to accept that it was me. I told her what I was doing and she was like, you're just adding more chaos by adding more games, adding more, and I was. I just couldn't see what I was doing wrong. To get back to what the administrator could do, it would be to train teachers that it starts with you. You're the common denominator. Let me help you.

I tried to circle back to maybe having assistance earlier in the SRBI process would be useful. Brandi did not accept the offering and said,

Yeah, but it did. It all came back to me a lot of times. I was just reading a book about beekeeping. This beekeeper said, "If I'm agitated, I always get stung. So, I learned to be calm when I went to work with the bees." I'm like, that's just like working with kids. It's me. It starts with me. It all does. How they clean the room, how they get their coats on, it's me. I can't have the whole circle stand up and go get their coats 'cause I'm gonna have a mess, so it's everyone on green. It's management, but it was like I had to watch me. I'm the closest person. I have to watch me.

Feeling humbled by what Brandi’s experienced in practice, I could not wait to get back to review all that she said.

Claire: Creating Spaces for Current Ability

Meeting Claire in her classroom the week before school opened allowed us to sit quietly in her room. She offered a, “grown up” chair for me to sit in. I offered that a child’s seat would be just fine. She insisted and let me know that she could not allow her guest to sit in a chair that could become very uncomfortable. Claire was from Jamaica and the only person of color that
participated in these interviews. She spent four years teaching at the second-grade level. She came to America in 2009 with her husband who is in the United States Navy. Claire became re-certified to teach in the United States, but it took her six years. She earned her Master’s degree and quickly found an opening here at her school. Claire had a very affluent career in banking in Jamaica and shared that PreK, “wasn’t even part of my vocabulary”. She was young and making good money. “It was pretty good”, Claire remembered. She had worked with children at her church and one of the deacons sent his wife to tell Claire that she should go to teachers’ college. Claire recalled, “I was looking into the future and I’m thinking, what’s gonna happen five or ten years down the line when everybody was coming out of Bachelors or Master’s degree training?” She tried to go back for business to be competitive, but, her heart was not in it. She said, “I said, ‘You know what, I’m just gonna go to teacher’s college and get it done.’ Financially, it was the best decision at the time, too, ‘cause I had to send myself to school, and that was cheaper so I enrolled in teacher’s college, did early childhood and here I am. This was Claire’s fourth year teaching PreK at this school. Prior to this, she taught at a child development center that she described as more of a childcare center than a preschool. Claire described her current school as having a curriculum to follow with themes while the child development center, “it was more whatever you wanted to do.”

We began to explore how it was that she uses themes in her classroom to prepare prekindergarten students for kindergarten. Her classroom had centers around the room. But, integrating themes in centers could sometimes be challenging.

Sometimes it [integrating themes] works, sometimes it doesn't, ‘cause there are times when you're trying to reflect the theme in different centers, which is ... Sometimes might be very difficult to do. But most time, [it’s okay] for example if we're looking at community helpers, for dramatic play of course we can get the dress up clothes and we can maybe stop at post office or police station, whatever it is, and focus on whatever the
community helper is. In the math area, we would maybe do the addition of the block people that we have. Use the people to do simple addition, with the blocks as well as building the work spaces for community helpers in the block area. In the listening area, we can maybe focus on listening to stories, based on whatever the theme is or the community helper as said before. And then you might have some other themes, let me try and think of one. That sometimes it might be a little bit more difficult to bring these different centers, or to reflect these different centers. Yeah, I'm thinking of maybe one, that love or friendship. I'm thinking of that one. It was very hard to reflect. For example, in the science area, what do you reflect in science for love. The theme love. And friendship. You're not so sure. Unless they're going to work on skills, that ... Okay, working together and partnership. But to show science, love, I don't know how you're going to do that one.

Claire was the only participant to bring up the idea of themes. I remembered that Ruby talked about developing a curriculum that was inquiry based and wonder if that would be easier for Claire to implement in centers than themes. We move to thinking together about an experience that Claire had in preparing a child with a special need for Kindergarten. Claire took a moment to think of a particular child. She began with an overall thought about children and decided on a story about a child with behavioral challenges.

I enjoy working with young children. There are many challenges. I think my deficiencies in the area of working with special needs children, if I don't have ... I have not had a lot of experience working with them. And I must say, since I have been working at TFS, these are my first experiences working with special needs children. The autism, and the ADHD, and so forth. One incident ... Well, not incident. For example, I had one student last year. He was violent, violent. Am I saying that word properly? My accent is so thick. Yes. But, it was no fault of his. But, I found it challenging, trying to meet his needs while meeting the needs of the other students. Because, he needed that one on one support, which I'm not so sure was really giving. He required a lot of my time. He needed that one-on-one, which I had to give a lot, cause the other assistants were scared of him. Because he was so violent. So, I had to spend a lot of time with him, and I think that took away from my other students.

Much like Mary Anne, behavior was a topic that brought Claire to wonder if she was preparing the child with challenging behavior and the other students in class. She continued,

On a positive note, yes. I like that I am able to bring students from one level to the next. For example, a child comes in not knowing letters of the alphabet, not knowing numbers. And then by the end of the year you see that child almost able to read some CVC words. I've had many success in that area. And I also find that the goals that we have for the year
... Knocking on wood, thanks to God, I usual meet my goals by April every year. So, I can cruise for the rest of the school year, usually. I don't know. I just ... I just act the fool in the classroom. That's all I can say.

Claire found humor as a way to prepare children in knowing their numbers and letters of the alphabet. Claire identified other ways she prepared children:

But, I think music and movement as made a great impact on my teaching. I find that children learn much easier when you put music to a lesson. For example, I tend to be loud, and children are usually loud. So, my class is usually loud. For example, we were looking at the letter A. We go say "A says ah,ah,ah,ah,ah." Just say it very loud, oh softer, softer. And on the spot, I just come up with that song, and whatever works depending on the mood you're in. If they want a yawn, ahhhh. Just whatever, creative ideas of teaching. What they're doing at the time, yes, and try to incorporate the learning into other activities.

Yes, and it has worked so far. And I also, like I said, for school curriculum, because it also teaches how to form the letters. And I think that helps as well. The big lines and the little lines and where the lines go. Big line up, big line down, little line across. That's letter E, and I find that it works easier for children.

I was thinking about how Claire described how she prepared, but, it was not until she explained her philosophy that I better understood.

No, in terms of what they're learning. Learning ... Educational goals, probably. For example, ... yes, kindergarten too, we can put kindergarten in there. But I'm thinking like, a child come into the classroom not know much, not knowing the basics of preschool. Not knowing letters, numbers, and by the end of the school year they're able to identify all 26. So, bringing that child from one ... From level A to level Z. We have specific goals for preschool. So, for preschool, for us, it's identifying letter of their names. But, I focus on all 26, regardless. And usually but the end of the school year, most of my students know all 26 letters in preschool. Letters in their first name. And if they ... So, you have by April, every bodies achieved that, and then from there if they go on that's ... Learn more, so be it.

My approach is I ... How do I think about it? I'm thinking my approach is preparing you for lifelong learning. So, even though we have these set goals right now for preschool, if you have mastered all the goals, I'm not going to stop at these goals, I'm going to push you a little bit further. Does that make sense? Did I explain myself? Yes. So, that's what I was saying. Even though our goal was identifying beginning letters ... Well, the letters in your first name, sorry. I focus on all 26, just the same.
There it was. It took time to unravel however, I began to understand Claire’s perspective. Much like Annie, Maggie and Dionne, Claire saw her job as preparing children for life. I was intrigued.

I asked Claire if she could share a story that stood out for her as she prepared a child for kindergarten.

Yes, I have one student ... Oh, I have quite a few. But, I think the one that stood out to me the most would probably be my boy last year, who has autism. The violent one as well. Of course, I can't say it here. What happened was he was not supposed to be in my room. He as supposed to be in a different classroom, but there was not enough space. So, I had to keep him. When he came, he was non-verbal. Very violent. Wasn't able to function in the regular classroom setting. There was a lot of biting, kicking, spitting, screaming, crying. And, I showed him that I really cared about him. And, I remember one day, we had a fire drill. We had, not a fire drill, it was a lockdown. And we had to go into our hiding spots. And he started freaking out and crying and screaming. And I went to him and touched him and said "It's okay, it's okay", and he turned around and he started to bite me. But I said "it's okay". Once I stared talking he turned to everyone and started "oh, oh, oh" and he started rubbing my hand and he gave me a hug. And he calmed right down.

He didn't even know what he was doing almost? I guess. I think we had built that bond, where he felt comfortable with me enough to say, okay, this is Mrs. Smit. She's not going to hurt me. There is no need to be scared, so I'm not going to bite her. That's what it meant for me. Loving on my students every day. Yeah, but, I think it's building this level of trust. Allowing children to ... You have boundaries, and ... What would we say in Jamaica? Be lovingly firm. So, you set your rules and your standards, your regulations for your classroom. There are consequences to every behavior. So, if you do this, this is what will happen. If you do this, this is what will happen. At the same time, we try to have fun. Let them know that I really love them. If ... I like to give gentle hugs. My students, if they come to me and they are very sad, I try my very best to be loving. And we build that relationship. And once, I think once students are comfortable with you then that is how families get to trust you and love you as well.

So, as a parent, I want to give them that security as well. To know that, okay, my child is safe with you and I'm comfortable with my child in your care for eight hours.

Like Annie, Claire found building a relationship with a student was important to the child’s social and emotional well-being. Claire’s example was solidly in the social and emotional realm. Unlike her colleagues, when we explored the idea of preparing children for kindergarten,
Claire explained that she only prepared for kindergarten when it was parent initiated. Claire commented:

It was parent initiated. The child did not master the assessment card that we have. There was a deficit, is that the word I'm looking for, in a lot of the areas. Number recognition, letter recognition, even shapes. The basic things. So, we decided maybe it would be best to give him another year in pre-school. Where we can maybe focus on ... Do skills, maybe help him to sharpen those skills a little bit more.

When you were sharing how you prepare prekindergartners for Kindergarten, you spoke a great deal about the relationship you had with that little boy. Were there other skills you thought about teaching?

Educational skills!? No, I like to work on the social, emotional skills. However, I don't think I would retain a child if social skills are not fully developed. I think we can maybe learn those along the way, probably. Yeah, but I find in pre-school, too, that the social skills are really necessary, and that if ... I think if those are intact, then it makes it much easier for the academics to be achieved. Cooperative learning, cooperating with each other. Cause we learn from each other in the pre-school. I try to do a lot of peer teaching. And if students can sit and work together well, learn to accept each other, learn to learn from each other, as well, then I think it sets you up for success in other areas.

Our interview was laced with Claire's insecurities about her accent. She checked in with me often by asking, “Did I say that well?” Being enamored with her accent, coupled with her gestures, I clearly understood Claire and what she was saying. Claire continued on with her explanation,

We have our routines that we follow of course, but I try not to drill. I try to just teach, if I'm making sense. And of course, we do review. A lot of what we learn, for example, if we have learned five letters over the past month, maybe at the end of the month I will go over all five, but I'll try to do it in the form of a game or ... I'll say, oh, for example, just try to play around, tell a boy "I bet you don't know what letter this is. Is this A, no I don't think this is A.”? So, I put a lot of humor in my teaching and put it that way. I put a lot of humor in it. Say, "No, Mrs. C., that is letter B." I said "No, this is A, are you crazy, can't you see?" "No, it's B!" "Why is it a B?" "Because, B climb down, frog jump to the top, curve at the top then curve at the bottom." So, little stuff like that, and I find that work for me a lot. I pretend like I'm a dummy most of the time and they're the ones teaching me.
Looking around the room together, Claire began to talk about the environment that she was looking to create. She purchased new primary color curtains and manipulatives. She began to compare herself to prekindergarten teacher with whose classroom was connected by a child’s bathroom. What kinds of things (referring to the other teacher’s teaching strategies) did you see that makes her teaching seem advanced in your experience?

The different activities that she came up with, like, there are some things I won't even think of. For example, she has this board in her classroom, a single board. A "I wonder" board. So, during the day the kids will be there playing, and if they have an "I wonder", she will write on the board and stick it on the board. And maybe the same day or the following day or whenever, she will go back to that "I wonder" question, she would find the materials or find the answers to that question and have the children actually build a lesson around it or have the children explore it someway, somehow, or she'll provide the answer. There was a child who was questioning something about bones or someone had a fractured bone or something. And she was able to build a whole list and everyone's bones. And her son, who is a past student form here, as well, he's interested in bones. And so, he brought his little skeleton in and he taught the lesson to the students about bones. Sometimes resources hampers what you do. ‘Cause, of course, as a teacher a lot of the money comes from my own pocket. Sometimes I think the resources hamper your ... Not your growth, what's the word I'm looking for? Hampers what you would do. The extent of what you do in the classroom. Yes, if you could give us the right materials that we need.

In second grade, but more so the preschoooler, learning is done through what they do. Learn by what they do in the classroom. For the preschoooler, a lot is dependent on the teacher. So, you have to set that environment for learning for the pre-school, even more than in second grade, to me, in my opinion. A preschoooler only sit for, what, five to ten minutes, a second grader can maybe go for more. A second grader can maybe explore on the internet a little bit more to find out if information, to go on learning. But preschoooler is ... the pre-school is limited. It's mostly guided. Yeah. And the resources then for a person who can't even sit that much longer is different.

I asked her what she would share with an administrator if she could about preparing young children for kindergarten:

Having the right resources. That's key. Having material that will ... what would I say now? In hands, cognitive, like thinking and thinking outside the box and that will spark some interest into something else. Let me try ... What else would I tell the principal? And a lot of that come from my pocket. Like, for this year alone, I think I spent almost a thousand dollars on my classroom. I kid you not. Just buying stuff I think will enhance
learning a little bit. Yeah, I bought that alphabet card over there. That focus on the letters, the sounds, tracing. I also bought my new curtains. But like classroom environmental stuff and learning. And manipulatives. Yes, manipulatives. And those that I bought, they focus on STEM, science like building and pulling apart and what will happen if ... Miss J. who is next door, she is very good in the STEM area sciences for pre-school. So, I pick her brain a lot. So, over the summer we spoke and we decided that, okay, you get this set and I'll get that set. So, we can trade ...

As our time began to wind down I asked Claire if there was anything else she wanted to share:

What I would say, I think you have to be passionate about what you do, if you are a teacher. It's, and of course this only a cliché and everybody has been saying it, but teaching is really and truly not about the money. It's about investing and giving of your time to children. And if it's not something that you love then just don't get involved in it. For pre-school ... Yeah, for teaching in general but pre-school is my love, my passion, because I'm an early childhood. You just have to give it your all. Yes, and just love, love the children, love them past their issues. Just love them past their issues.

These stories were collected over an hours’ time with each participant where I learned about their perceptions of preparing prekindergartners for kindergarten. Realizing that I was interested in their experiences and being in the narrative tradition, sharing my interpretations with each participant and refining those interpretations as we got to know each other a bit better lead me to identifying themes.

Themes

Overarching themes began to rise to the top each time a participant touched on them when telling their story. Teachers had their reasons for entering the field and what tied them together was the passion they brought from their own lives. Claire found her way to prekindergarten after navigating away from the world of finance. Annie came from the art world, loving the process of creating rather than a product. Dionne stopped pediatric nursing filled with sickness to pursue education. Brandi found meaning in being with children early in their lives and wanted to share what she had learned from her own children. Ruby was taken with the growth she saw over time from the full school year and Mary Anne knew from her own
preschool days, this was where she wanted to be. The range of experiences in the field was wide. Brandi, with the least experience of four years, to Annie’s 31 years total in the classroom. Each participant shared many of the same challenges in transitioning children from prekindergarten to kindergarten. Their passion serves as a voice for young children by keeping center play in the classroom as a primary way to develop social and emotional competence and “pull” children from play to work on kindergarten academics.

Deep reflection and analysis of this data, thinking about the participants and their experiences brought to the surface many themes. Some specific to each teacher and some that deserve more study in the future. Nevertheless, the common themes which surfaced seemed to be inherent to each participant’s experience in the transitioning prekindergarteners to kindergarten phenomenon. The themes of “Pulling” Children for Kindergarten Academic Preparation, Playing Primarily to Prepare for Social and Emotional Competence and Children’s Behavior, Special Learning Needs and Relationships and, lastly, Kindergarten and prekindergarten Collaboration and Expectations Kindergarten surfaced in most of the teachers’ stories. Under the theme of Children’s Behavior, Special Learning Needs and Relationships are two sub-themes: Schedules and Preparing Children for Life.

“Pulling” Children to Kindergarten Academics Preparation

Each participant in this study designed her classroom to support children’s learning through the use of center play. The centers were designed to encourage children to play with each other and with easy access to the toys. The toys were at eye level and easily reachable, the centers had enough room for at least three to six children and the toys are easily picked up by having outlines of where the blocks go, hooks for the dress up costumes in dramatic play and baskets for the small manipulatives used for table top activities. But, there was an interesting
phenomenon that surfaced in each classroom. Teachers were “pulling” children from the basic instructional strategy of center play in order to work with them on cognitive skills of letter identification, sounds and numbers. “Pulling” a child is when a teacher calls a child from a play center to work with him or her individually or in a small group, usually at a table, on a math or literacy skill. Ruby referred to it as offering, ‘academic support.’ Teachers engage in this strategy when the prekindergarten teachers think about transitioning children to kindergarten. It could be just before the end of the year, as Annie pointed out, or during the year, based on daily assessments, as Brandi has mentioned.

Ruby shared during her interview how she, “pulls” certain prekindergarten children who had met the academic goals she has outlined for the year to work with her one on one to further their academic skills. These skills focused on putting letters together and being able to count to fifty. Ruby described how she was bumping up her game when she pulled children to work on kindergarten academics,

So, if their mastering certain things, I just make sure I’m upping it up a little bit when I work with them. Pulling them aside. Doing separate things that are different than what I would do with a PreK kid.

In another example, Brandi had expressed that she “pulls” children that she believes have met the prekindergarten goals. Both of these teachers have centers and over their careers have found that play was how children learned best. In fact, in this study, one half of the prekindergarten teachers interviewed, Ruby, Anne Marie and Brandi, discussed “pulling” children in one way or another during the day as a way to instruct young children on their letters and numbers; skills which they described as kindergarten skills. Annie and Dionne, described deliberately pulling children that do not have the academic knowledge needed to transition to kindergarten to review either with flash cards or through rote memorization in order to ensure
transitioning children have that skill. Claire, however, did not refer to sitting deliberately or use the work “pulling” to describe a strategy for preparing a prekindergartner for kindergarten. However, Claire would not look to “prepare” children for kindergarten but rather for life. If there were specific, “educational learning” to be addressed for a child, it would be at the request of the parents or administrator.

“Pulling” children seems to be at odds with how teachers felt about what was developmentally appropriate. Stories that centered on setting up their rooms to engage children in the social and emotional domains to prepare them for life, the importance of finding a child’s interest and how the academics will come in time were the center of how teachers saw their role in preparing children to transition to kindergarten. But, five of six teachers did prepare prekindergarten children for the demands of kindergarten academics by, “pulling” children from center play. Annie stated,

“we need more uninterrupted time for play based on development trajectory for young children...And then it's funny, because there are some kids that you try so hard to prepare them. They're just not getting, there's just something. They're just not getting the letters, and there's ... at the end of the year, it can turn into for me more rote, and I don't like to teach that way. I really don't like the flash cards and stuff like that. I try to do some, make some games. But really when it comes to recognition of a symbol, you gotta repeat it. You gotta see it, gotta repeat it.”

But, Brandi, who has changed her approach since a year of behavioral challenges in her room, does not wait until the end of the year to “pull” children. She conducts assessments on academics throughout the year and “pulls” children to work on academics accordingly. Brandi shared and remembered the growth she experienced as a teacher that used to have a classroom that was all play-based. She opened her story with the importance of being with children early and understanding play to be the basis for young children to learn. But, Brandi changed since her experience two years ago. Now, she employed play centers and she ‘pulls” children. She “pulls”
children during naptime and during center playtime to assess. Brandi described “pulling” children,

What was really great was they weren't napping, and so I would call them down and say, okay, you're gonna work at this table and you're gonna do this packet. It had everything in it they needed to play a game and then fill out a worksheet. I mean, this is K. This is K, so at first, I was guiding it. Then after about a month, I'm like, they got this. Then I would just give it to them and they did it. I thought, score. That's kindergarten. They need to go to a center, they need to play a game, and then do a packet with cutting or pasting, or whatever it takes.

Annie pulled her children to tables, Dionne pulled her students to work with her. Ruby pulled her students to prepare them for the academics of kindergarten. Mary Anne did not use the word “pulling” children as a way to prepare them for the academics of kindergarten. However, she referred to having children work with her on letter identification, sounds and numbers at a table while other children were in play centers. Claire neither referred to “pulling” children nor described working with children in small groups at tables on academics in her practice. She did so only if a parent and administrative decision was made that she had to work with a child more on “educational skills”. Mary Anne described her style as gathering data from both centers and table work with her as a way to prepare what activities she would use to practice at the tables.

But, perhaps the most telling about how play and “pulling” work together is the way prekindergarten teachers coupled the strategies in the classroom. prekindergarten teachers described disguising “pulling” activities (letters and math) as fun or making sure they were delivered as games. In Brandi’s room, the tabletop activities were where she gave her attention. In the play centers, children socialized with little interaction with Brandi. It became complex as Brandi described how she designed the classroom in a way that the reward for playing well was to work with the teacher. Brandi explained,

I could be doing literacy, I could be doing art, I could be doing any of the meat and potatoes of the stuff that you would think children would sniff out and say, “oh, no. This
is work. I don’t want any of this. But, you’ve couched it in such a way where, okay, I’ve sent you off to your center. Are you building? Your building a wonderful building. Then I’ll see one of them stand up and look to see what I’m doing with the children I’m working with.

Brandi highlighted the idea that as she changed her instructional strategies to incorporate less play and more table top academics she increased her assessments.

I had classrooms where, in fact, the first seven years, it was just play, play based, play...go play. I changed. The BCBA coming in and saying they have to earn the right to play. Those words were so foreign to me. There’s no way they can...I don’t understand this. Children play naturally. Children, you know, but she’s...I would only do assessments when it was report card time or whenever I needed that information., Now, I’m taking data all the time. I only did it three times a year. We all, just hearing the talk [other PreK teachers], it would be like, well, I don’t have to do that until March. I don’t have to do that until report cards come out. I’m like, yeah. But what I found this year, I keep like 20 sheets of assessment with their names. Taking data, taking data. So now, what do I do for the student who as al 26 letters of the alphabet? I take them to the next step. I do phonics. I had three students doing K work. During rest time, she’s not napping, come on, sit down and read this book to me.

There was an understanding that most children would engage in centers as the foundation of the classroom and they would be pulled to “work” with Brandi on skills through varied interventions to get ready for K. Centers served as the backbone of the classroom designed to meet the social and emotional growth and learning of the child. But, “pulling” children was the backbone of preparing prekindergartners for kindergarten math and literacy work.

While prekindergarten teachers were not interested in abandoning play centers because they support the social and emotional aspect of a child’s readiness for kindergarten, five out of six participants engaged in some sort of “pulling” children from play or during rest time to work. This was the preferred academic strategy to preparing young children for the reading, writing and mathematics of Kindergarten. Dionne did so because of the pressure she felt from administration to do well on their PreK assessments. Brandi pulled children because she believed that was now her job to teach letter and numbers. Feeling a sense of being out of control when
play was the sole vehicle for learning she finds every moment to prepare children. Mary Anne pulls children to prepare because she found for some children that it was the repetitive and rote strategy that works. Annie employed the rote strategy only near the end of the year. Claire brings her children to meet all of the assessment milestones by April and from there uses the rest of the year to relax. Ruby pulled children to meet the Early Learning and Development Standards (ELDS), but does not think about the Common Core work. Whether it was pressure to show good assessment scores or a desire to ensure a child has the academic tools to succeed in kindergarten, in this study, prekindergarten teachers were “pulling” children to prepare them for the academic demands of kindergarten.

Overall, prekindergarten teachers used the play centers as an instructional tool to develop what they believed was needed in the social and emotional domain to transition to kindergarten. But, there were not changes during the year made by teachers in the play centers that supported a change in a child’s social and emotional development. In Claire’s classroom, the only change in centers was when a theme changed, the center was not changed to scaffold a child’s development in a social or emotional competence.

And then you might have some other themes, let me try and think of one. That sometimes it might be a little bit more difficult to bring these different centers, or to reflect these different centers. Yeah, I'm thinking of maybe one, that love or friendship. I'm thinking of that one. It was very hard to reflect. For example, in the science area, what do you reflect in science for love. The theme love. And friendship. You're not so sure. Unless they're going to work on skills, that ... Okay, working together and partnership. But to show science, love, I don't know how you're going to do that one.

For Ruby, if there is not a problem for children in the routine of center play, she does not change her centers to challenge children in their social and emotional development. She tells us,

A lot of times socially, they don’t’ really need any support; just the structure of the school day is enough for them.
Only Annie referred specifically to centers as a strategy to develop a child’s social and emotional competence. Annie offered,

[Basically,] I have typically two chunks of time that I can do center time and one of them is right before rest, so it's not optimal for young children, because theyoungers and even some of, depending on our own body, our own physical needs, they're ready to rest. So, those challenges, the social challenges, negotiating for a turn. They're getting interrupted to go use the restroom because they're gonna lay down for a rest and you don't want them to have an accident. So, those are challenges, yeah.

Prekindergarten teachers in this study are designing play centers at the beginning of the year and changing them during the year to reflect differing themes, but not designing centers to reflect the changing levels of social and emotional development that young children exhibit. However, except for Claire, each prekindergarten teacher would “pull” children from center play to scaffold learning on a one to one or a small group basis at tables to prepare them for kindergarten preparation in letters and math. Then, based on the teacher’s assessment of a child’s math and literacy competence, she will scaffold the next activity to support the child’s next step of development. (There was less planning time for play than there was for academic support and less assessment)

**Playing Primarily to Prepare for Social and Emotional Competence**

Each teacher used play centers in her room as the strategy to implement prekindergarten social and emotional curriculum. When teachers in this study referred to center play it was often in regard to developing relationships with peers, self-regulation and the teacher and child relationship. The block center was sometimes used to describe the relationship of objects to each other such as exclaiming to a child, “You put on block on the other block” emphasizing the positional relationship between the two blocks. Annie described it in this way,

[I] Sit down in the block center and play with them, yeah. Dramatic play, I more” sit back” in dramatic play, or fill in now and then and they engage with me, but I don't like to be the center, I just like to be in there in the mix. When they're ready, I scaffold-
Annie used centers as the basis of her classroom’s curriculum. She spoke to wishing she could spend more time in the centers. She described play centers as a way to teach using a child’s interest which could then be the hook for learning letters and letter sounds and learning numbers. But, her main reason for having center play was to ensure children could practice social and emotional competence. In particular, she cited negotiation as a skill that leads to a child’s ability to get along in the world; an overarching reason that she was in the field of Early Childhood Education (ECE).

So, I think that a lot of kids catch up with the academic piece, but if they don't have that how to be in the world, connect with others, be fair, be respectful, it's gonna be a lot harder road, and they develop that early on. That's, who they become happens ... the root of or the base, I can't think of how to put it. Their personalities, and their values start early on, you know.”

Using play centers to learn how to learn how to be in the world worked in Annie’s classroom. When preparing children for Kindergarten at the end of the year, however, Annie “pulls” children and employed rote instruction rather than use center play to learn the letter names, sounds and numbers.

Mary Anne found her centers promoted skills through a play based environment, but, did not exclusively use centers to do that. She “pulls” small groups of children to meet with her throughout the year to “work” on letters, letter sounds and numbers. It was important for Mary Anne to teach to the whole child and not just to the academics, but, the strategy used to prepare for Kindergarten was academic activities at the table with her. Mary Anne tried to build academic props into the curriculum for her students that were not yet ready to take on table top activities.

“Yes, so he preferred the block center or the dramatic play center, so I would bring over my little kit and insert the letters into the play that he was doing, and that made it more motivating for him. There are a few, like dramatic play or blocks are more the play-based
centers, and those are the centers that he wanted to be at the most. My literacy and math are always games, but I find that the kids really seek out dramatic play and blocks.

Mary Anne continued,

I would say at centers like blocks and dramatic play, they're learning a lot of social skills and role playing. I've actually, it's actually one of my goals this year to incorporate more literacy. I might put books over there that they can, like my dramatic play might have books about families or different jobs or communities. They could be looking through and trying to act out those roles. I also saw a great thing online where they wear a necklace with a role on it. They might wear a necklace that says mom or dad or brother or sister, so then they're picking up on those roles, so I thought that might be fun. Literacy and math, and even discovery and writing are more, they are playful and I find that the kids don't even realize that they're doing work or working really hard, because it's just fun for them.

Mary Anne offered that scaffolding play to support relationship-based themes might be a path she was willing to travel, such as exploring families and communities through roles. While earlier Mary Anne described combining letter recognition during play to scaffold a child’s letter learning, there was not discussion about how re-design play centers to scaffold the social and emotional competence of the young child.

Brandi designed her room with centers as well. She claimed play to be the best way children learn. Yet, because of her very challenging year when several children did not respond well to her classroom play only environment, she now used individual work with her as a reward of sorts. She engaged with children to prepare for academics, but, did not engage to the same level in center play. Brandi shared,

Centers are around the perimeter of the room, just like the grocery store. All the milk, and the eggs and the bakery, everything is around the perimeter of the store. But, then the high calorie stuff is in the middle of the store. The high calorie stuff is the stuff where I’m sitting and doing my assessments, I’m doing the lessons, I’m doing the interventions. Those are the tables. I have my little bag. Then what’s fascinating is, is as they’re at centers and playing, they’ve earned through an activity, they’ve earned to go to centers. Then, I’m calling friends over. I’m running a math lesson, then I’m calling friends over and I’ll have two that have not had a turn yet will try to come in and say, “When is it my turn?” For the vegetables. I will say, go back and play. I know you are there.
Brandi explained that when she heard voices rising in the centers, she would send children to the peace table or ensure that whatever it is they are having difficulty with is silenced quickly. She did not describe her involvement in that resolution.

But, Brandi, even in light of her recent practice change, suggested that play was the key to preparing prekindergarten children for kindergarten.

“I think any good PreK teacher would know that you try to bring play into everything as much as you can. Even transitions. All of my transitions are games...if they’re not a game, I call it a game.”

Conversely, Dionne looked to include academics in play, but her main focus was developing a sense of self-regulation for children through play. Dionne looked to get all of her instruction in through play. Dionne explained,

Well, I think that the academic goals of letter id and letter sounds and that, it’s important, but it’s not the be all, end all. And I would rather have a student go to kindergarten, being able to sit, do their job, communicate well, play nicely with their peers, solve their problems. I would rather have that kind of student go forward. And, if they’re a little bit behind in knowing that C-A-T spells cat, I’m okay with that. But, the demand continues. So, from K to first, first to second with testing and all of this, it’s just expected that these kids know more and they’re not allowed to be kids in my opinion.

For children who are not demonstrating through play knowledge of letter identification, letter sounds and numbers, Dionne used a repetitive strategy. She described,

So, I do it visually. We’ll introduce letters the good old-fashioned way, [she holds up one hand as though it were a flash card and uses the other hand to point to it.] here’s the letter A. I introduce the sound along with the letter, again and again.

Both Ruby and Claire planned the prekindergarten curriculum to support that year’s specific group of children through the center themes. They consider academics only when a parent was interested in having the academics play a larger role in their child’s curriculum. As Ruby simply stated,

“They learn from play. They’re missing that a lot in our K classrooms.”
Both Ruby and Claire keep the centers theme based. For Ruby, if children are not exhibiting any challenges, behavior or otherwise in the centers, she keeps the centers as they are. She offered,

[A] lot of times socially, if they don’t really need any support, just the structure of the school day is enough for them really.

Research shows that play is a developmentally appropriate instructional strategy for young children, many teachers find a match in their desire to employ play in the classroom as a way to be voice for young children. But, to meet the demands of preparing prekindergarten children for kindergarten academically teachers “pull” children, too. These prekindergarten teachers balanced their commitment to play as a method for learning under the pressures of academic demands by “pulling” children to the side. Their motivation to engage in “pulling” could be anchored in their passion to prepare children for life.

Five out of the six prekindergarten teachers described a passion for preparing young children for life, not just for kindergarten. Preparation for academic demands in kindergarten is part of preparing a child for life, but, for these teachers the preparation lies in the developing a child’s ability to learn to get along with others and to know more than what the math and literacy curriculum describes for prekindergarten children.

Claire and Annie declared that they understood their work to be teaching young children be prepared for life. Claire clarified her passion:

My approach is I ... How do I think about it? I'm thinking my approach is preparing you for lifelong learning. So, even though we have these set goals right now for Pre-school, if you have mastered all the goals, I'm not going to stop at these goals, I'm going to push you a little bit further. Does that make sense? Did I explain myself? Yes. So, that's what I was saying. Even though our goal was identifying beginning letters Well, the letters in your first name, sorry. I focus on all 26, just the same.
Annie described her passion as her job. She educated me,

Well, that's my job. It's what I do. It's my job. I mean, that's it, you know. I'm not just preparing for kindergarten, I'm preparing for life. I see, here I go again. [Annie reaches for the well-used tissue to wipe more tears from her eyes].

We're the first people. I don't even see it as preparing for kindergarten. I see it as preparing for life. For some of these kids, our relationship with them can make a huge difference, because they may have been in a situation, their lives thus far, they've been living in a situation where there's no one even really available, because the mom's distracted and either maybe doesn't have a husband or maybe just can't get a job, the stresses of life.

Both Dionne and Brandi decidedly guard the right of young children to benefit from developmentally appropriate practice as outlined in the ELDS. Dionne was adamant,

But, we are a voice for PreK and if it isn’t developmentally appropriate, I won’t do it!

Brandi also has her anchor in passionately protecting young children, she states,

I've said that's not developmentally appropriate. I'm gonna stop you there!

Mary Anne’s passion shined through,

I think the social and emotional, being able to keep up a back and forth communication, being able to follow the routines in the classroom without a million reminders. Just things like that, just all those things that you really need to be successful, not even just in school, but in life, that we should be building the foundation for now.

Center play has a role in the execution of teacher’s passion in the early childhood environment. Centers stand as places to play and to learn. Brandi grappled with her new-found focus on academic practice and attempts to hold the idea of play in mind as she “pulls’ the children. She thought aloud,

“It’s still play, but it’s guided play, and it’s not play with a peer. It’s play with a teacher, so, it’s work.”

The balance between play and “pulling” time in the classroom became an issue. There was a desire by the teachers to reduce transitions during the day in order preserve play during the day. But, with increased demands on time it was a challenge. The teachers’ passion for preparing
children for life and not just kindergarten naturally led to stories about being crunched for time because of the number of transitions during the day and it was playtime that suffered. A sub-theme that emerged and is borne out from the research was the daily schedule (Kagan, 2013).

Annie and Brandi felt strongly that time spent transitioning in and out of the classroom during the day at the current frequency, at least four times, was too time consuming. Brandi discussed scheduling in terms of having to be very efficient to make this work and it can leave little time to explore centers and develop relationships.

I'm working with three to four students tops at a table for maybe 30 minutes. I have to be very efficient. I don't have a lot of time because there is breakfast and there is ... Now, we're gonna go here to music. Now we're gonna go here. We're gonna go back to the classroom. We're gonna do circle. Now we're gonna do ... I'm up here. They're like little satellites spinning off and I have three over here. I only have two to a center. It keeps a nice quiet classroom.

Annie simply stated,

There are too many transitions in this school.

Prekindergarten teachers seek ways to keep play in the classroom. The pressures of academic demands and schedules do not dampen their passion to protect developmentally appropriate activities and interactions for prekindergarten children. They also recognize that prekindergartners are leaving a developmentally appropriate setting, for the most part, and entering into a more academic based setting. Preparing prekindergarten children for the demands of kindergarten by ensuring letter identification, letter sounds and numbers can present a problem for children that are not ready to attend to those skills.

Children’s Behavior, Special Learning Needs and Relationships

There was little that teachers in this study referred to that matched their commitment to children in their classroom that have a diagnosis or a special need. Further, each teacher described preparing a child with an identified need or what they considered challenging behavior
for kindergarten in the context of a social relationship. Each teacher looked to develop social and emotional competence through scaffolding a child’s ability and skills in prosocial behavior and self-regulation. In this study, it was observed or described clearly that play centers were how teachers designed their rooms for children to interact with materials and play with other children. However, except for Annie, five teachers did not describe play centers as vehicles to scaffold children’s social and emotional development in preparation for kindergarten. What did surface through analysis was that when a child acted outside of the rules of the classroom or expected behavior teachers relied on the student-teacher relationship to teach about how the child should behave in the classroom. There was no discussion about designing or “pulling” a child into a play center to practice social and emotional skills. Brandi employed play centers as a holding place for children to play while they waited to be called to practice academic skills with the teacher. Annie did use play centers to practice some social and emotional skills for typically developing children.

Annie described scaffolding children’s social and emotional development through play and through her relationship with children. She utilized play centers to support the skill of negotiating. She also used play centers to increase a child’s ability to be attentive during activities. Ruth described developing the social and emotional domain through the everyday structure she put in place. She only intervened when a child did not respond to that structure within the play centers. Dionne believed that every good early childhood teacher knows that children learn through play and used play centers as the activity in which children engaged each day. The stories highlighted the philosophy of teachers desires to employ play to support social and emotional competence throughout the day and design the centers to support that competence. However, when children experienced difficulty in negotiating the rules or they have a special
need or identified disability that limited their ability to negotiate this domain in centers, teachers relied on their one to one child-student relationship rather than utilizing a play center to practice the appropriate social or emotional skill or ability.

The stories each prekindergarten teacher told about their experience preparing a child for kindergarten were anchored in a child’s difficulty in the social and emotional domain. Often, the teacher described the child as a child having a, “behavior”. Each story about this child ended with the child being able to move through a difficult situation in large part because of the child-teacher relationship. The teachers stayed with the child through any difficult behaviors and credit the relationship as the reason they were able to positively influence a child’s behavior.

Claire told the story of the “violent” little boy that, after biting her, was calmed just sitting next to her. Annie told us of her determination to sit with children as they were pulling their hair out or banging their heads on the wooden bathroom door. Mary Anne described the little boy who would bolt from the classroom and soon did so just to spend time with her. Finally, Ruth described having to develop specific calming measures for the little boy who had difficulty being around others.

Relationships were a mainstay during stories about children in the prekindergarten classroom. Whether a child had a special need or not, teachers developed relationships with the children in their classroom. But, teachers highlighted the importance of being in relationship specifically with children that had an identified disability or some special need. Teachers explained that trying to calm and deescalate the behavior of a child having difficulty meant staying with them until the behavior was deescalated. Claire, described her time and attention to the “violent’ child as the ingredient to advancing the child to the next step. Annie told the story of the little boy who would just be getting into building with blocks, and it was time move to the
next transition in the classroom and he would throw blocks across the room out of frustration. Brandi described her classroom as satellites bouncing off of each other because they have “to get here and have to get there” which would set some children on a trajectory of crying and not able to follow all of the directions. Dionne lets us know that the best way to work with a child that is very shy is to talk to one on one and develop a relationship. This would likely not be accomplished during large group transitions or through rote instruction during tabletop activities. Each of the stories represented the deep importance of developing the teacher and student relationship. However, relationships were not a focus in the stories during the preparation for kindergarten academic work, but rather, they were a focus for developing social and emotional competence in all children and especially important with children having difficulty complying with behavioral expectations of the classroom.

Mary Anne’s and Brandi’s stories about student behavior in the classroom highlighted the importance for each of them to have strategies in place to help regulate children’s behavior in order to assist children having difficulty and ensure others in the classroom continue to learn. Brandi designed her classroom to “pull” children with a special need and children with higher-level academic levels during the day.

You know things are getting along great. But then I'm running two to four at a table. Then I'm doing my work. Once I finish my lesson with everybody, if I have time later in the day, then I do the intervention work or the higher-level work

Annie and Claire saw their work as being beside children no matter how difficult the behavior. Annie saw her work as staying with the child through, ‘head banging, hair ripping’ or any other behavior exhibited. Claire offered the importance of love when discussing being bitten by a young child identified with autism.

[Yes], just love, love the children, love them past their issues. Just love them past their
Teachers relied on their one to one relationships with children with a special need or identified disability to change behavior, there was no discussion about using play centers to practice newly learned skills from this one on one relationship. Teachers did not “pull” children to practice their social and emotional skills in play centers. Preparing prekindergarten children with an identified disability or special need required scaffolding differently than scaffolding a typically developing child. The scaffolding was again different in a developmentally appropriate based practice than in a more skills based practice. Transitioning from a developmentally appropriate based classroom to a more skills based classroom could cause challenges for teachers and for children. Having both prekindergarten and kindergarten teachers familiar with the other’s professional expectations and curricula surfaced as a theme that might positively influence the transition from prekindergarten to kindergarten.

Kindergarten and Prekindergarten Collaboration and Professional Expectations

prekindergarten teachers in this study told their stories passionately when speaking about their young students transitioning from their classrooms into kindergarten classrooms. The concern about the change in emphasis from relationship building and play centers in prekindergarten to academic demands and few, if any, play centers in kindergarten emerged as teachers’ stories unfolded. While discussion of implementing the ELDS versus the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) surfaced as one part of teachers’ experiences, the emotional tone that came through when speaking about being a voice for young prekindergarten children by defending developmentally appropriate practice was palpable. This passion translated into teachers describing their desire to communicate with kindergarten teachers to ease the child’s
Dionne expressed her desire to collaborate with kindergarten teachers,

I would love to be able to sit down and talk with a K teacher. Our days are jam packed and you know, sometimes the structure of our day doesn't allow for me to sit down with a K teacher and be like you know "I overheard in your class that you guys are doing this" you know, "I like that idea. Do you have a suggestion on how I could maybe prepare them to get to that point for next year?" And timing's just huge in every aspect. I mean in just collaborating with other peers in my own grade level, it's difficult. But to even broach to the next grade level --!

Dionne continued to explain her desire to collaborate, but, as a voice for young children would not collaborate at the expense of developmentally appropriate practice.

You know there's the Pre- K teachers and the K teachers and we have our own grade level meetings and they have their own grade level meetings. And we have staff meetings, but we don't really ever have meetings where I can sit down and talk to this teacher about this prospect. So, I think time plays a huge role. And then I think it's important as a Pre- K teacher to stay as up to date as possible with what are the expectations of K students. Like revisit the common core and see what are we aiming for. And we have over time and especially we've looked at our own standards and it's been like "Okay you know what? We're aiming for this, but that's not a developmentally appropriate practice so we're gonna scale down on this.

Specifically, Dionne expressed,

[prekindergarten teachers] are a voice for PreK and if it isn’t developmentally appropriate, I won’t do it.

Brandi equally strongly states,

I am going to guard the door, their doing the frameworks [Common Core], but, I’m doing developmentally appropriate [practice].

Mary Anne’s story highlighted her concern about advancing children to kindergarten even if they are not kindergarten ready in every domain. In reviewing her thinking with an administrator about children she did not feel were prepared, the administrator described the importance of collaboration. She described it as, “[that is] the reason why we have the SRBI or
collaborating with your peers. It was important to get SRBI started early so then you can have that continuum and that alignment with the kindergarten teacher, and they can be working on that too right away when the student comes in.”

There was hesitance for prekindergarten teachers to transition their prekindergarten children into a setting that was vastly differently focused than on the life skills prekindergarten teachers felt they provided. To hedge this possible experience for young children the prekindergarten teachers in this study have a strong desire to collaborate. However, there were small steps that prekindergarten teachers were taking to positively influence the transition from prekindergarten to kindergarten.

Brandi borrowed a kindergarten transition strategy from her colleague that she integrated into her classroom. She was certain that it would not succeed, so she “watered” it down. Soon, she realized that the prekindergarten children were able to follow the directions needed to transition from one center to the next and adopted the full kindergarten method. Dionne, Annie and Ruby each reflected that they should really visit a Kindergarten classroom to see if what they have in mind happens in a kindergarten classroom really does happen. Ruby stated,

I haven’t really been in a whole lot of kindergarten rooms. I haven’t had time to really look. I would love to spend some time in kindergarten classrooms and see, just see how their rooms are set up. Even just looking at the work on the walls and seeing what they are doing. Just what each teacher is doing and what their style is.

Mary Anne currently seeks out assessment information only from a kindergarten teacher when she has a child that is doing very well in what she believes would be Kindergarten work. Claire hopes to collaborate with a kindergarten teacher, but has no plans on how that could happen.

Understanding and respecting the expectations and work that teachers discussed both prekindergarten and kindergarten teachers have to live by. prekindergarten teachers are guided
by the ELDS while kindergarten teachers are guided by the CC. One reason for guarding the
door for prekindergarten during the kindergarten year is based in the differing documents that
guide both the prekindergarten teacher and the kindergarten teacher. Brandi and Dionne both
offered their opinions on the ELDS and CC. Brandi offered,

They're [Kindergarten teachers] doing the framework [Common Core], but, I'm doing
developmentally appropriate for three to fives. It's like the library has steps and ramps.
PreK, it's ramps. K, it's ... But it's still accessing the program. You're still accessing the
building, but you're either gonna take the ramp or you're gonna take the stairs. That's
what I would tell. A lot of times, I hear from the K teachers in our building what you
guys need to do. I'm like that's not developmentally appropriate. They can't count to 50.
There's no way. I mean, we could do it and it's a song, A, B, C, D. It doesn't mean
anything. They're not gonna really have the ... It's like, well, they could come into K
knowing this, that would be great. During math meetings, I've said that's not
developmentally appropriate. I'm gonna stop you there. Sure, I can stand up and we can
all count to 50 every day. But, when you go to assess them on it in K, it's gonna fall apart.
The train is gonna fall off the tracks because it's not developmentally appropriate. I would
prefer that they know how to at least get to 10, and then by the end, to 20, not to 50.
There's no way.

Dionne offered a way to begin to bridge what Kindergarten and prekindergarten teachers
were doing.

There's definitely a division. You know there's the Pre-K teachers and the K teachers and
we have our own grade level meetings and they have their own grade level meetings. And
we have staff meetings, but we don't really ever have meetings where I can sit down and
talk to this teacher about this prospect. So, I think time plays a huge role. And then I
think it's important as a Pre-K teacher to stay as up to date as possible with what are the
expectations of K students. Like revisit the common core and see what are we aiming for.

As teachers continued their stories, an element of respect emerged as prekindergarten
teachers’ stories focused on how to make the transition smoother. Dionne felt strongly about how
families may think about the work she does in prekindergarten.

I've often heard that you know when talking about Pre-K it's not held to as high of a
standard because some parents just look at it as babysitting and look at it as "Well my
kid's just there for the day to play." And what they don't realize is all the background that
we're doing and that we too have expectations because our expectations are based on
what is gonna happen year after year after year after year. We're the foundation that's
built upon so yes you think as a parent that you're just dropping your kid off from 9:00 to
4:00 to play and to have fun and to be with people when in reality, yes, all those things are true, but they're also learning a multitude of skills.

Dionne continued her thoughts about how teachers may think about prekindergarten teachers. She admitted,

I mean, I think unfortunately, I think that there is some downplaying what PreK teachers do from the K aspect. That’s a feeling that I often get. You know, I’ve overheard K teachers say, “oh well, I would never teach PreK or you know...that puts a wedge between us. You don’t often hear it the other way necessarily. And, I’ve said I feel like as soon as you make that leap to K it changes. It becomes more hyper focused on the academics and less focused on the child.

Teachers expressed a desire to have the respect of families and kindergarten colleagues. At the same time, they looked for the links of collaboration that would make the experience for transitioning children stronger. Mary Anne looked to collaborate with many others in the school aside from the kindergarten teacher. She explained,

I just think all that collaboration is important. I think it’s really important to collaborate with the parents and the special ed teachers, even if the kiddo doesn’t have an IEP, I realized that the special ed teachers have a lot of really great ideas and resources. They had ideas that I never even thought of, that they’re using for special ed kids, but they can be used for a universal design for learning.

Collaboration requires time in the day to allow teachers to gather and discuss children’s progress, what is working and what is not working. Dionne understood the importance of collaborating, especially when transitioning from an ELDS approach to a CC approach

So, my hope would be that admin would have that [developmentally appropriate] mentality, but, I also fear that admin also has their demands put on them from above and that unfortunately although they would love to see that in a K classroom there’s also a push to get the skills necessary to move onto first grade.

Academics are the language of the larger Kindergarten to grade 12-education system. Being perceived as a teacher that is not able to transition to kindergarten children that are ready to learn can reduce confidence in one’s capability to prepare prekindergarten children for
kindergarten. But, the teachers in this study stayed strong in their commitment to play centers and to pledging to prepare children for life, not just kindergarten.

Dionne highlighted the division that existed, while Ruby alluded to having little voice in trying to have Kindergarten teachers understand what was going on in prekindergarten. Claire and Brandi are motivated to focus only on the prekindergarten curriculum and become interested in the Kindergarten curriculum only when there was a parent interested in pursuing that avenue. However, they were open to collaborating with kindergarten teachers, starting with understanding how kindergarten teachers structure their room environment.

Collaboration and understanding the expectations of each grade is foundational when transitioning young children that are on such a rapid developmental trajectory that influences learning. Prekindergarten teachers are sensitive to how they are viewed by families and by colleagues. Feeling and earning respect is a first step to genuine collaboration that will ultimately confer a benefit to transitioning prekindergartners.

**Summary of Themes**

Analyzing the experiences of prekindergarten teachers preparing prekindergarten children to transition into Kindergarten has resulted in four themes: (a) “Pulling” Children for Kindergarten Academic Preparation, (b) Playing Primarily to Prepare for Social and Emotional Competence, (c) Children’s Behavior, Special Learning Needs and Relationships and, (d) Kindergarten and Prekindergarten Collaboration and Professional Expectations. Following these themes leads us on a path to understanding that in preparing prekindergartners for transition to Kindergarten there needs to be attention paid to aligning prekindergarten and Kindergarten expectations of what children should have in their repertoire of behavior and knowledge and the importance of both play and “pulling” for each and every child in the prekindergarten classroom.
Chapter Five

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of six magnet preschool prekindergarten teachers preparing transitioning prekindergarten children for kindergarten. This study was also conducted to understand how prekindergarten teachers were preparing young children for kindergarten and their perceptions about why they chose certain preparation strategies or methods.

Research Question: What is the experience of prekindergarten teachers when preparing prekindergartners for transition into kindergarten in a public magnet school?

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of prekindergarten teachers preparing young children for transition from preschool to kindergarten. The qualitative research was conducted with prekindergarten teachers who detailed their experiences in formal interviews. The co-creation with this researcher took place in the interview using guiding questions that were answered and recorded. Through the analysis of the stories that teachers shared, this researcher re-storied their experiences and found common themes. Creswell (2013) discusses the essence of narrative study as being co-created by the researcher and participant or small group of participants upon sharing their stories. Chapter Five discusses the themes that emerged from the data analysis of the teachers’ stories. The emergent themes are held up to the theoretical framework used in this study and is in keeping with the seminal contributors to the literature. Chapter Five also outlines the implications of the findings from this study, suggestions for future research and final thoughts.
“Pulling” and Playing to Prepare for Kindergarten Academic

Preparing prekindergarten children to transition to kindergarten is foundational to the beginning of formal schooling; however, the NCDTL (2000) study found that there are close to half of transitioning prekindergartners that have difficulty in transitioning. Sending prepared prekindergartners to kindergarten is an expectation of families, administrators and kindergarten teachers, but prekindergarten teachers are finding structural, time and administrative barriers to this preparation (Kagan, 1990; Goldhabar, 1994). For prekindergarten teachers in this study, acquiescing to the academic demands meant “pulling” children from their prekindergarten curriculum to be made school ready. For Annie, it meant sitting and drilling children at the end of the year to make sure the student could recite letter names and corresponding sounds and recite numbers. For Brandi, it meant embedding tabletop activities and then “pulling” children during naptime to work on Kindergarten academics throughout the year. Ruby ‘pulls” children from centers to sit with her to ensure the child was demonstrating the appropriate skillset. But Claire does not even consider it until a parent and administrator suggested she work with a child one on one to hone those skills.

Preparing prekindergartners for the academic demands of kindergarten was a concern of each teacher in this study. Yet, all agreed that the prekindergarten experience was much more than preparing children for the academics and they each practice teaching by having centers in their classrooms as a means to play and refine social and emotional skills to be prepared not only for kindergarten, but, for life. The seminal authors (Dewey, 1938; Froebel, 1877; Erikson, Paley, 2004; and Piaget, 1962) offer that early childhood is a time of immense developmental changes and it is critical to allow children to explore their environments. Each author discusses the
importance of having that developmental time to grow and learn. Pianta (2009) offers that such development will develop in the context of adult relationships that guide and encourage young children. Today, engaging in play during centers is more than a strategy, it is the design of the classroom and it allows this guidance and time and space. It is the cornerstone of each of these teachers, yet, there is the practice of taking a child aside to prepare for the academics one on one with the teacher. To ensure that children can demonstrate to their new kindergarten teacher and to ensure that the school can show that prekindergarten children have met their goals is resulting prekindergarten teachers to have to “pull” children away from play to use strategies that they would not use at any other time with children this age.

Given the discomfort prekindergarten teachers experience when engaging in practices that are not developmentally appropriate, they wait until the end of the year or find times during the day, strive to “hide” work under the guise of fun to still get the job done that is being asked of them. They have the confidence and capability to merge play and academic preparation through “pulling” in spite of their commitment to developmentally appropriate practice.

Interestingly, there are time that teachers are surprised at what young children can do. As Brandi pointed out, part of her work was to look at herself and see where improvement in her practice could be. She offered,

I think it is over their [PreK children’s] heads, but let me experiment with it. And so, I did my centers that way. I mean, this was high order thinking, three and four-year old’s, I thought, you know what? I’m undercutting them. I am selling them short. It was a failing on my part, not on Delia’s part. It was fascinating because for me, walking into her room, seeing that system and saying now, this is too old, even for kindergarten, and then just trying it. It was fascinating. I also felt if it works, the future children [in Brandy’s class], I’m not gonna have this big speed bump when they move over into Delia’s room.

Mary Anne offered her thoughts as she imagined Kindergarteners to benefit from developmentally appropriate practice.
[I] think K teachers aren't necessarily having, they do centers, but I think not necessarily dramatic play and blocks. You see, I think some do but not as many because it just, from what I've heard in kindergarten, there's just not a lot of time for the dramatic play and blocks, which I wish there was, because you're learning a lot from that. I think even the materials that the kids see are completely different.

Further research on why can’t teachers “up their game” (Ruby, 2017) in play, not just in academics by pulling children. What would have teachers unable to instruct during particular times of play?

Each of the teachers in this study discussed the importance of play, but also the importance of sending children to kindergarten prepared. During the interviews, it surfaced that these two distinct areas are addressed through play and “pulling”. Play is used to develop social and emotional competencies while “pulling” is used to instruct. Dionne and Brandi explicitly claimed that they would not use strategies that were not developmentally appropriate. They both described what they did to prepare children for kindergarten and still making it fun for kids.

The teachers also suggested that the schedule of specials during the day was challenging to get in the amount of play and academic preparation that they would like to. This was supported in research (Kagan, 1994; Lynch, 2015) as a structural barrier to employing play in the classroom. In this study, teachers cited schedules a problem because of the amount of time a transition takes for each special and recess each day. Moving eighteen to twenty-one children was time consuming and created behavioral difficulties for children in the middle of building a structure in the block center or engaged in drawing activity, for example. Annie found scheduling interruptions more challenging for some children than others.

Children’s Behavior, Special Learning Needs and Relationships

Each teacher expressed her understanding that for prekindergarten children to be successful in kindergarten her job was to develop each child’s social and emotional competency. Teachers identified center play as a way to help prepare children in this domain. However, part
of developing this domain required children have a chance to play in the centers. Given the schedule and academic demands that require a teacher to ‘pull’ a child from play centers, time for play is reduced. Moreover, children whose developing skills in the social and emotional domain are less developed than the majority of the class would benefit from more time practicing these skills. Just as teachers “pull” children to practice letter identification, letter sounds and numbers, so must children have chance to practice self-regulation and prosocial skills.

It was clear that positively influencing young children’s social and emotional development through a teacher-child relationship was necessary to meet the needs of all children. Developing these relationships requires time and attention during meaningful interactions. Play could serve as the vehicle to meaningful interactions between the teacher and the child. Then, the teacher could ultimately support the interaction between peers during play to support social competence as well as emotional competence.

In this study, it was observed or described clearly that play centers were used by each teacher in their classrooms. Yet, in each story teachers did not describe or rely on centers in social and emotional development for children that were advanced or delayed in the social and emotional domain. What became apparent was that when a child acted outside of the rules of the classroom or expected behavior in play centers, during rest time or transitioning from space to space in the school, teachers relied on the student-teacher relationship to teach about how the child should behave in the classroom. There was little discussion about designing or “pulling” a child into a play center to practice social and emotional skills. Some teachers used play to practice some skills for typically developing children.

Annie described scaffolding social and emotional development through play. She utilized play centers to support the skill of negotiating. She also used play centers to increase a child’s
ability to be attentive during activities. Ruth described it as “stepping up” her game if the everyday routine in play in centers was not enough to promote a child’s social and emotional competence. Dionne let us know that every good early childhood teacher knows that children learn through play. The stories highlighted the philosophy of the teacher’s desire to use play to support social and emotional competence throughout the day and design the centers to support that. When a child had trouble negotiating the rules or they have a special need or identified disability that limits their ability to negotiate this domain, teachers relied on their child-student relationship.

Yet, each teacher who told a story about a child with a special need or a child that had difficulty in complying with the rules of the class described her time and attention to the child as the ingredient to advancing the child to the next step. Claire told the story of the “violent” little boy that, after biting her, was calmed just sitting next to her. Annie told us of her determination to sit with children whether they were pulling their hair out or banging their heads on the wooden bathroom door. Mary Anne described the little boy who would bolt from the classroom just to spend time with her. Finally, Ruth described having to develop specific calming measures for the little boy who had difficulty being around others. Teachers toggling their time between large group transitions for schedules and individual preparation time for academics leaves little time for play in centers. Play is expansive, large blocks of time are necessary to develop the cognitive processes needed to self-regulate and learn (Whitehead, 2010).

Annie told the story of the little boy who would just be getting into building with blocks and it would be time move to the next transition in the classroom. Brandi described her classroom as satellites bouncing off of each other because they have “to get here and have to get there”. For children that need more time to engage in the activities of the daytime is a gift.
Dionne lets us know that the best way to work with a child that is very shy is to talk to one on one and develop a relationship. It is unlikely that this would be accomplished during large group transitions or through rote instruction during tabletop activities. Each of the stories represented the deep importance of developing the teacher and student relationship. Nevertheless, relationships were not a focus during the preparation for academic work. Relationships were apparent during the part of the stories that teachers told about trying to calm and deescalate the behavior of a child having difficulty.

It was clear that positively influencing young children’s social and emotional development through a teacher-child relationship was necessary to meet the needs of all children. Developing these relationships required time and attention during meaningful interactions. Play can serve as the vehicle to meaningful interactions between the teacher and the child. Then, the teacher can ultimately support the interaction between peers during play to support social competence as well as emotional competence.

**Kindergarten and Prekindergarten Collaboration and Expectations**

The preparation strategies employed by prekindergarten teachers in this study to transition prekindergarten’s from prekindergarten to kindergarten were anchored in center play, “pulling” for academic preparation and, establishing and developing the teacher – student relationship. prekindergarten teachers believe kindergarten teachers want transitioning children to have solid knowledge of twenty-six letters, numbers to fifty and understanding the beginning, middle and end of a story. However, 50% of the teachers did not really know what occurred in a Kindergarten classroom nor did they know the academic expectations. As Mary Anne told her story, she would contact a kindergarten teacher if she was interested to know what assessments
would be useful to give a child in her class that was showing signs of doing Kindergarten work. Ruby expressed her desire to talk to kindergarten teachers if there were ever time to do so.

Dionne experienced a feeling of division between the prekindergarten and kindergarten teachers. She shared, “there’s some downplaying of what PreK teachers do from the K aspect.” Ruth described her experience as not, “having a voice” with Kindergarten teachers, but, was able to voice the importance of hands on experiences for young children during Curriculum Academy, a time when prekindergarten gathers in the summer to discuss prekindergarten curriculum. Brandi, Dionne and Annie spoke strongly to the importance of employing strategies that were developmentally appropriate in spite of the academic expectation to produce knowledge of letter identification, letter sounds and numbers and the scheduling pressures of specials and recess.

Further, not only is there lack of communication, a perceived lack of respect, but, overarching guidance for prekindergarten teachers is issued from the Office Early Childhood and the overarching guidance for kindergarten is issued from the Department of Education. Dionne’s addressed this in her narrative. She stated, “I think it’s important as a PreK teacher to stay as up to date as possible with what are the expectations of K students. Like revisit the Common Core and see what are we aiming for.” Brandi was open to working with her kindergarten neighbor and took ideas to try with her prekindergarten children. She surprised herself at the ability of the prekindergartners to master a transition activity that Brandi had previously thought was too “old” for her classroom. Annie described using the Common Core Standards in literacy as what she would share with the kindergarten teacher about preparing prekindergartners for kindergarten. She commented, “I feel like we should be preparing children for the academic piece, you know,
literacy, mathematics, you know and science. All the different subject areas. But, I see that social emotional piece as the really important foundation...”

There was hope in Dionne’s story, “We [prekindergarten and kindergarten] don’t really ever have meetings where I can sit down and talk to this teacher about this prospect. I would love to sit down and talk with a K teacher...I overheard in your class that you guys are doing this’, you know, ‘I like that idea. Do you have a suggestion on how I could maybe prepare the to get to that point for next year?’ I mean just collaborating with other peers in my own grade level, it’s difficult. But, to even broach to the next grade level...”

Despite the passion of prekindergarten teachers to keep the prekindergarten classroom centered on play they employed practices to meet the pressures of preparing children for the demands of kindergarten in short spurts of pulling them. Their capacity (Bandura,1986) to balance ‘pulling’ and ‘playing’ has kept the prekindergarten rooms in this school billed as play based through centers.

**Implications for Practice**

This research explored the experiences of Public Magnet School prekindergarten teachers preparing transitioning kindergarteners. Teacher perceptions indicated that to adequately prepare young children they must have the support of not only their colleagues in prekindergarten, but also, colleagues in kindergarten, families, the building principal and district superintendent to understand the importance of developmentally appropriate practice in the classroom. To use school materials and resources requires teachers and principals and community to work together to understand the developmental trajectory of young children in their growth and development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). prekindergarten teachers have confidence in their capacity to support
developmental growth and learning of children as they transition into kindergarten (Bandura, 1971) if they combine a deep relationship, play in centers and “pulling” for specific instruction.

The overall implication from this is alignment. Prekindergarten teachers have as their basis the Early Learning Development Standards (ELDS), which is based on developmentally appropriate practice and Kindergarten teachers have the Common Core Standards (CC) as their basis. While the ELDS nods to Common Core by discussing individual needs of each child and the Common Core nods to the ELDS by highlighting the developmental anchors, teacher instructional practice and selected curricula are not always aligned to show how to create environments and teaching strategies most effective along the developmental continuum from age three to age eight (ELDS, 2014; CT CC, 2014).

Another aspect of alignment for this work is that if prekindergarten and kindergarten teachers align their curricular approaches, each teacher, child and community would benefit from a deep connection between the grades as the prekindergarten children transition to kindergarten. Alignment that allowed a way to chart progress along a developmental trajectory would give both kindergarten and prekindergarten children an opportunity for processes to mature, specifically the ability to attend over time to learning (Bruner, 1985). Teachers may be open to practicing a more aligned curriculum if structures were in place to promote deep discussion about what each grade expects from the other grade. Further, having the support of administration to promote meaningful schedules would assist in creating blocks of time in the prekindergarten classroom for play.

In fact, from this study, we see prekindergarten teachers are working hard to achieve alignment on their own. We see Brandi finding any moment during the day to work with children on academics in order to prepare prekindergarten children to know letters, letter sounds, numbers
and the parts of a story. Mary Ann and Ruth sit at their tables and “pull” children to work with them on writing and numbers, Dionne employed traditional flash cards at the end of the year when the prekindergartners are ready to transition and Annie employed instruction to gain rote responses. Claire utilized more academic strategies at the request of families with the support of an administrator. Children look to Brandi to see when it was their turn to work on activities that are more academic. Mary Anne had children asking her to give them work like older children do and, Ruth pulled books at a higher level from the reading specialists library to support children ready to read at a higher level. “Pulling” children is the prekindergarten teacher’s answer to an aligned curriculum.

Currently, schools are making time and space for students to explore and learn about what their interests are in the classroom or in a common space, such as the library. This is being referred to as a Makerspace. This space is designed for students to think together as they solve problems and create ideas. The basic underpinning of Makerspace can be attributed to Bruner’s Developmental Theory as it based on the student’s interest. This type of curricular activity could be a linking activity between prekindergarten and kindergarten because of its open ended and interest based structure.

Although different from alignment, another implication of this work surfaced out of the theme that prekindergarten teachers develop deep relationships with some children in their class. Teachers described their job as largely preparing children for life through supporting children’s social and emotional competencies. Annie and Claire spoke about specifically being available at all times to children with a special need or disability, especially in regard to behavior difficulties the child may have. Mary Anne is going back to school to earn a Master’s in Special Education to learn about using relevant and meaningful strategies that positively influence children’s self-
regulation abilities. Encouraging teacher to student and student-to-student relationship building during play at centers offers a dimension to play that will expand the opportunities for children to practice self-regulation and emotional and social competencies. This will deepen the relationship between the teacher and the child and, the peer-to-peer relationship.

This study is useful for state administrators, public school building administrators, curriculum developers, prekindergarten and Kindergarten teachers because recognizing the experience of prekindergarten teachers highlights the current gaps in curricular alignment. Districts and educational systems invested in continuous improvement for schools will find enhancing the collaborative relationship between prekindergarten teachers and Kindergarten teachers serves to help students reach their highest potential.

This research is useful to families and communities, also, as families prepare children for transitioning to join formal schooling. For communities, this study provides a way to recognize the unique developmental needs of younger children and their teachers and create a space for the youngest learners and their teachers to thrive. Additionally, assessing social and emotional development during play designed to the interests of children will be more relevant and more meaningful to understanding how to plan for each child. As Brandi described, “it’s taking the children’s interests and designing your lessons and units and activities around what they’re interested in.” Additionally, this research informs professional development systems in both the Kindergarten to twelfth grade system and the prekindergarten systems when planning to meet the needs of all of their teachers.

Teachers grapple with how best to prepare prekindergarten children to transition to kindergarten. They toggle between their passion for developing children’s social and emotional competence for life through center play while “pulling” children to ensure they are prepared to
meet the academic demands of kindergarten. As an educator, I endeavor to promote teaching strategies that support each child’s highest potential. As a scholar-practitioner I hold myself accountable to be knowledgeable about effective strategies that benefit young children in their learning, growth and development.

Understanding teacher’s desire to transition well prepared prekindergartners to kindergarten to meet the demands of kindergarten, it is clear that collaboration with and understanding expectations of kindergarten teachers is important to them. This will require the support of school leadership. As a scholar-practitioner and member of the school community, I intend to connect with school leaders to initiate and possibly facilitate conversations about how prekindergarten and kindergarten teachers currently communicate about expectations of children transitioning from prekindergarten to kindergarten. In this study, prekindergarten teachers refer to the role of families. Developing a professional development opportunity where there is an intersection of families and teachers to understand the child’s experience in transition would further the discussion about positively influencing the experience of the transitioning child.

In light of this study, I seek to be in service to teachers that are grappling with being a voice for young children and protecting children’s “right” to play as a strategy for learning, yet, find themselves “pulling” children to ensure they can face the demands of kindergarten academics. I hold myself accountable to offer a foothold to teachers to look closely at balancing their practices of play and “pulling”. To do this, I intend to reach out to instructional school leaders to cooperatively seek practical solutions which bridge the gap between prekindergarten and kindergarten specific to children’s growth, development and learning.

My bias entering into this study was toward play and I have had the privilege to understand six different teacher perspectives that have challenged my bias as an educator.
Supporting teachers in their aim to prepare children to transition to kindergarten, as a scholar practitioner, I can offer an approach that will shed light on collaboration issues, how play centers, “pulling” and teacher-child relationships are currently used to prepare children. This change in my perspective on play opens the door to understanding more deeply how prekindergarten teachers prepare young children. Developing a way to ensure collaboration, play and “pulling” and teacher-relationships are considered in the practical work of implementing curriculum will change how prekindergarten children experience transition into kindergarten.

**Further Research**

Due to the limited number of participants in this study, more research could be conducted on a larger scale to determine if the findings of this study could be generalized. While selecting six participants is a worthy study, it is too small to generalize any finding. The number of participants would have to be chosen carefully, however, to ensure that teachers’ stories maintained the essence of their experience.

This research was conducted in the beginning of the school year that may shape teacher’s stories about preparing for transition at the end of the school year differently than interviewing teachers at other points in the year. With the emergent theme of “pulling” children as a strategy, more research is warranted to understand if this could be a beneficial strategy throughout the year or is “pulling” indicative of a different concern for prekindergarten teachers. Just like the little boy in Mary Anne’s class that found a way to get Mary Anne’s attention to take a walk with her every day, what if that attention was planned and the child knew every day he would get that attention. Could one to one attention in during center play time with a small group of children give that needed attention to young children? Could scaffolding center play to support, meet and challenge young children to become more socially and emotionally competent be useful given
play is a strategy well supported in research? Moreover, asking how can scaffolding center play to develop higher-level social and emotional skills be achieved. If the kindergarten academic skills are improved and well learned by individual attention and repetition, could that be used during play for children learning the necessary social and emotional competencies needed to transition to kindergarten?

Moreover, conducting research, which highlights the effectiveness of aligned curriculum between prekindergarten and kindergarten, would provide professional developers a professional development curriculum insight for providing effective resources. Further, additional research on how teachers are using the ELDS and the CC as guiding documents would be valuable to creating a coherent educational system for families and their children. This would support colleagues in the same schools in their relationship to and with each other. This level of compatibility in the school would lend itself to a positive school culture and climate.

I intend to research more deeply the phenomena of “pulling” children in order to foster teaching strategies that positively influence a child’s learning and growth and development.

Understanding the multi-dimensional aspects of play and how that could enhance both a prekindergarten and Kindergarten teacher’s practice warrants more research. Teachers may understand more deeply the developmental trajectory of children and can plan through play to meet the needs of the child and not be too narrowly defined by developmentally appropriate practice. I think of Brandi’s experience and her collaboration with a Kindergarten teacher. She surprised herself at the ability level of her prekindergarten children to be able to move through center time in the fashion of kindergarten children. At the same time, Annie’s thoughts on how it would be important for kindergartens to maintain and use blocks and dramatic play as a way to continue to develop social and emotional domains of five and six-year old’s. A curriculum that
engaged both the developmentally tenets, coupled with the academic demands supported by appropriate strategies that teachers could use would advance the instruction of young children in all domains. For administrators, it would serve to combine resources to be used across grades to support children transitioning into Kindergarten. These children new to Kindergarten could utilize materials for younger children until they are ready to use more complex materials.

Finally, designing a research study to be conducted in the school community that highlights family engagement and asks about current family collaboration and relationships. This research would allow for additional teacher and family articulation for how children are prepared for kindergarten. Further, this research would explore more deeply the theme of preparing children for life, but in the context of how that is perceived in community families. Further research into families and communities’ role in the transition of prekindergarten children is likely to raise a strong voice that will influence how prekindergarten teachers and school districts approach transition from prekindergarten to kindergarten.

**Final Thoughts – Building Bridges to Kindergarten**

Young children, their families and teachers in prekindergarten and kindergarten alike want children to achieve their highest potential. Research shows that while prekindergarten teachers still hold center play as the centerpiece in their classrooms play in the early childhood classroom is on the decline. Many of the barriers are anchored in trying to meet demands of those outside the prekindergarten classroom. prekindergarten teachers must have a place to voice their experience on a larger scale to make changes to the educational system for our youngest learners. As a scholar, I would bring the invaluable narrative approach in the qualitative tradition as the method to promote collaboration between prekindergarten and kindergarten teachers as they and we determine practical solutions. As a practitioner, we must build a curriculum to span
both prekindergarten and kindergarten that will allow teachers to prepare children for prekindergarten using the developmentally appropriate practices anchored in play that they are capable of using and new strategies borne out of “pulling” children to work on the academic skills.

Finally, the narrative tradition has led to my deeper understanding of the experiences of prekindergarten teachers. Re-storying teachers’ experiences has led to an understanding that prekindergarten teachers are already naturally aligning what they believe are the expectations between prekindergarten and kindergarten by “pulling” children. Prekindergarten teachers are eager to collaborate with kindergarten teachers. As a scholar practitioner, I will support teachers in building a bridge to ease the transition for our youngest learners.
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