TEACHERS’ PERSPECTIVES AND PLAY-BASED LEARNING
IN KINDERGARTEN CLASSROOMS

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to explore how teachers’ perspectives and experiences in kindergarten classrooms influence the implementation of play-based learning. This study employed a qualitative, intrinsic case study to capture the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers who received kindergarten seminar training (KS) through the Kindergarten Entry Assessment initiative (KEA). The researcher was interested in exploring whether or not play-based practices had been sustained in kindergarten seminar teachers (KS) classrooms, after the initial training and ongoing coaching support. A review of the literature suggests teachers are faced with the struggle of trying to provide appropriate methods of teaching and assessing, while meeting high academic expectations for kindergarten set forth by the framework of NCLB Act of 2001 (Goldstein, 2007). Coupled with this struggle, is the challenge to utilize appropriate assessments to capture children’s learning through high engagement play-based experiences. The data collection for this intrinsic case study included semi-structured in-depth interviews, observations, and coaching notes. The researcher conducted face to face interviews with six participants. Although the participants perspectives toward play were positive and they shared a common understanding of guided play to teach academic content, their perspectives and beliefs about play were not enough to sustain play practices in their classrooms. This study has implications for the need to continue efforts to shift instructional practices in kindergarten classrooms that allow for play experiences to take place.

Keywords: developmentally appropriate practices (DAP), scripted curricula, play-based learning, teacher perspectives
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Appendix 1: Exploratorium
Chapter 1: Introduction

Kindergarten classrooms are suffering under rigid curricula and inappropriate assessments, making learning stressful for young children and hindering their developmental growth (Miller & Almon, 2009). Developmental areas such as social-emotional, cognitive, and physical skills are vital to a child’s overall development but have suffered over recent years at the hands of academic expectations (Gullo & Hughes, 2010). In 2013, the New Jersey Kindergarten Entry Assessment state initiative (NJKEA) was introduced in an attempt to shift curriculum and assessment practices in kindergarten to more developmentally appropriate, authentic methods of teaching and learning. As an identified goal in the Race To The Top Early Learning Challenge, the NJDOE began the implementation of a School Readiness Kindergarten Entry Assessment. The assessment tool being used in the KEA initiative is the Teaching Strategies GOLD Assessment System.

The two kindergarten teachers, two master teachers, and two school administrators, included in this study, were selected to be a part of a state-initiated kindergarten seminar (KS). Through the review of programmatic assessments conducted in all priority schools in the 2011-2012 school year and discussions of early learning in kindergarten, the school district included in this study, in collaboration with members of the NJDOE, Division of Early Childhood Education, determined a need to enhance the quality of kindergarten classrooms. The NJDOE partnered with members of the school district to develop a kindergarten seminar training for identified kindergarten teachers in priority schools. Identified teachers who participated in the kindergarten seminar voluntarily participated in the early rollout of the KEA initiative along with their building administrators. The two kindergarten teacher’s classrooms explored in this study were included in the initial kindergarten seminar trainings, which mimicked the NJDOE’s
regional kindergarten training. The intent of the kindergarten seminar was to provide support and training on the implementation of instructional and assessment best practices in early childhood. The kindergarten seminar teachers (KS) received five trainings throughout the course of the school year that addressed classroom environment, NJ kindergarten implementation guidelines, curriculum/play-based learning, and assessment (KEA initiative). Kindergarten seminar teachers also received classroom furniture to support a play environment and follow-up coaching from early childhood master teacher coaches.

Although a shift in instructional and assessment practices is greatly needed to ensure young children are provided with rich learning experiences, teachers continually experience pushback and resistance from building and district-level administrators who are driven by high stakes test scores (Miller & Almon, 2009). This has led to the challenge of negotiating teaching and assessment practices for kindergarten teachers, who are required to implement scripted curricula and paper pencil testing methods (Pyle & DeLuca, 2013; Gullo & Hughes, 2011). Often this results in classroom practices that do not support the development and learning of kindergarten children and raises frustration levels of teachers and children. Traditional education imposes adult standards, subject matter, and methods upon children who are slowly growing toward maturity, creating a large gap between the required subject matter and the methods of learning, which in turn causes a disconnect between the teacher and the learner (Dewey, 1938). The more didactic instruction becomes, the more detached it becomes from the way young children learn (Miller & Almon, 2009). Traditional paper-pencil pedagogies that create gaps between students and teachers, often do not meet the developmental needs of all students, particularly disadvantaged students who are often not reflected in standardized curricula (Jachyra & Fusco, 2016). Play-based learning can help close those gaps and address creating autonomous learning
environments facilitated by teachers. Although play-based learning environments promote rich learning experiences for children, teachers may not know how to implement this approach to learning. Developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) such as play-based learning, may not look consistent across kindergarten classrooms due to teachers’ understandings, beliefs, and level of training. Not all teachers share a common understanding of play-based learning as it relates to active involvement, autonomy, and the opportunity for choice, thus leading to various levels of student engagement and different methods of assessments utilized (Martlew, Stephen, & Ellis, 2011).

The aim of this intrinsic case study was to explore how teachers’ perspectives and experiences in kindergarten classrooms influence the implementation of play-based learning. This was done by examining the implementation of play-based learning in kindergarten seminar teacher’s (KS) classrooms, who were involved in the initial KEA initiative. The targeted audience for this research at the micro level includes individuals who have a vested interest in the kindergarten program within their local school district: teachers, administrators, superintendents, curriculum writers, board members, and parents. Teachers and administrators are at the forefront of creating sustainable, innovative practices in kindergarten. The targeted audience at the state and federal level will include, the Department of Education, Division of Early Childhood, Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes (CEELO), and The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Exploring kindergarten teachers’ perspectives regarding the implementation of play-based learning in relationship to curricular requirements, academic expectations, and teachers’ beliefs will provide curriculum program specialists and policy makers with insights on how to enhance kindergarten programs and teacher practices in early childhood classrooms.
Significance of Research Problem

Kindergarten teachers are faced with instructional struggles on a daily basis due to federal educational laws such as the No Child Left Behind Act, and state policy driven by those laws. (Lynch, 2015). No Child Left Behind’s main aim was to improve the performance of U.S. schools by increasing the standards of accountability. The aim of this law has put pressure on school districts to raise the accountability bar and close achievement gaps, in the process of preparing children for success on high-stakes standardized tests, which has trickled down to kindergarten (Booher-Jennings, 2005). In an effort to alleviate the pressures of NCLB at the early childhood level, the New Jersey Department of Education made efforts to reorganize its structure by expanding its reach in early childhood by providing guidelines for Preschool, Kindergarten and grades First through Third. Program specialists began training kindergarten teachers on developmentally appropriate best practices through the NJ Kindergarten Entry Assessment (NJKEA) initiative under the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge of 2013. This initiative was influenced and driven by the federal agency known as Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes (CELLO), which has encouraged state agencies to partner with local districts to implement Kindergarten Entry Assessments, as well as instructional best practices such as play-based learning in kindergarten. Although there is a shift underway, kindergarten teachers continue to experience remnants of NCLB, which continues to sling resistance and disapproval toward the implementation of a play-based approach to learning. In order for change to occur in kindergarten classrooms, a stern, aligned push from federal and state agencies will need to be communicated to school districts across the state, including policy language that supports developmentally appropriate best practices in early childhood and primary classrooms.
The research identifies the importance of play in children’s development and learning; play supports multiple domains of development such as cognitive, language, physical and social-emotional, and children’s overall well-being (Wood, 2014). Miller and Almon (2009) discussed the advantages of play and how children in play-based learning environments versus traditional kindergarten programs, end up equally good or better at reading and are more likely to become well-adjusted people. Miller and Almon’s (2009) research highlighted the need to develop appropriate kindergarten programs in areas of poverty to afford all children the opportunity to grow and learn. Children in low-economic areas need extra support when entering into high engagement play-based experiences, where they are able to reap the benefits of meaningful interactions that support acquiring skills in developmental areas (Miller & Almon, 2009, p. 8).

Play-based approaches to learning allows for the teacher to draw on children’s interest and lived experiences. Delpit (2002) highlighted the relationship between motivation in children and educational experiences and connections to children’s cultural lives and personal interests. Children are better able to internalize information and make connections to academics if the concepts and skills are related to their actual lived experiences and language.

Teachers and administrators have various levels of professional training and differing understandings of developmentally appropriate practices for early childhood, such as play (Jung & Jin, 2014). As a result, the level of implementation of play-based teaching and appropriate methods of assessing are inconsistent. Unfortunately, teachers tend to revert back to the rote, didactic methods of teaching they are familiar with, to reinforce content-oriented, skill-based instruction that is assessed using traditional measures; therefore, children continue to be exposed to inappropriate expectations and methods of teaching and learning (Gullo & Hughes 2011).

Freire (2000) argues the need to move from the concept of “banking education” which blocks
creativity and views students as objects to be filled with knowledge, to the concept of “problem posing” education which is based on creativity and stimulates true reflection and action toward reality. The concept of “problem posing” education supports the need to incorporate learning opportunities that include hands-on, real world experiences reflective of children’s interests and communities, and in turn help children to internalize the concepts and skills being taught and be more motivated to learn. Play-based learning is believed to support three areas of cognition: (1) enactive (physical interactions to develop an understanding of the environment), (2) iconic (the ability to represent environment through pictures and mental representations), and (3) symbolic (cognitive representations of symbols) (Jackyra & Fusco, 2014; Biazak, Levin, & Marley, 2010). The development of these areas of cognition in young children is credited to learning opportunities that encourage children’s interactions with the world (Gestwicki, 2007).

Researcher Positionality

A plethora of interwoven beliefs and experiences have influenced, crafted, and sharpened who I am as an early childhood educator. Over the past twenty-four years, I’ve watched the implementation of inappropriate practices in kindergarten transpire. It started slowly by removing learning center furniture and materials such as dramatic play, blocks and art easels from kindergarten classrooms, then increased to passing out dittos and imposing paper-pencil and computerized tests. My problem of practice sought to explore how teachers’ perceptions and experiences influence the implementation of play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms. In a quest to shift instructional practices in kindergarten, I will continue to ask the questions that examine early childhood instructional and assessment practices in our educational system. For example, are we creating a culture of non-thinking (follow-the-script) teachers who have been conditioned to teach only what has been mandated by policy makers and district
administrators? Do teachers feel a constant pull or need to shift their identity in order to meet such stringent standards, or have they unconsciously adopted an unnatural identity in an effort to survive today’s pressures and mandates? Do teachers feel supported and afforded adequate training on early childhood instructional best practices? Although my personal attachment to play-based learning provided me with the passion and dedication needed to conduct good research, I needed to acknowledge my biases in order to approach the research with an open-mind, considering all possible outcomes and avoid making premature conclusions (Machi & McEvoy, 2012).

**Early Childhood Background**

I began my journey in early childhood education as an instructional assistant in a preschool classroom. My love of educating our youngest learners was instant, as I realized the work I would engage in was critical to establishing a strong foundation for children’s’ future school and personal success. Over the years, as a preschool teacher, kindergarten teacher, first grade teacher, and early childhood administrator, I studied theorists such as Vygotsky and Piaget; early theorists who viewed play and exploration as an important part of children’s development of logical thinking. This idea supports the notion that interactions with real world experiences shapes how an individual internalizes information and constructs new knowledge from those experiences (Dodge, 2010). In my experience and pedagogical beliefs, play-based learning (when implemented correctly) supports children’s needs on a developmental and academic level in a way that allows children to internalize skills and information while making meaningful connections to the world around them.

As I examined my problem of practice, I further explored my own biases to better understand how my core beliefs and values affected and influenced the way I approached my work,
professional decisions, and my interactions with the participants in my research. Acknowledging the biases and beliefs generated by my own personal and professional experiences ensured I was approaching the research with an open mind, ready to accept all outcomes. Being open to all possibilities and allowing my work to emerge organically, will act as a vehicle to create positive change.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore how teachers’ perspectives and experiences in kindergarten classrooms influence the implementation of play-based learning. As a part of the kindergarten seminar training, the first cohort of kindergarten teachers (KS) were provided training on developmentally appropriate classroom practices for kindergarten that included; NJDOE Kindergarten Implementation Guidelines, classroom environment, curriculum/center-based learning, positive behavior supports, and Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge initiatives (Kindergarten Entry Assessment and PreK – 3rd grade continuum). The two KS teachers received classroom furniture, instructional materials for play centers as well as coaching from early childhood master teachers. Although kindergarten seminar teachers were provided with resources and training, play-based practices may not have been sustained. One could hypothesize the current testing and accountability mandates hinder the implementation of play. School administrators are faced with the pressure of producing high test scores in all grade levels. Teachers now spend more time testing and engaging children in direct instruction in literacy and math than they spend allowing children to learn through play and exploration (Gullo & Hughes, 2010).
Findings from this research may enable educational leaders to better examine our educational system in order to shift instructional practices to a play-based, child-centered approach to teaching and learning that engages children in authentic learning experiences.

**Research Questions**

This research examined the participants’ overall beliefs and experiences of play-based learning in kindergarten. The secondary question was developed to address the “academic expectations” aspect of teachers’ experiences.

**Primary:** How do teachers’ perspectives and experiences influence the implementation of play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms?

**Secondary:** How do kindergarten teachers believe testing and accountability expectations have influenced their attitudes towards the implementation of play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms?

**Definition of Key Terminology**

Important key terms will be defined in this section to serve as a reference throughout the research study.

**Developmentally appropriate practice (DAP):** an approach to teaching based on research regarding how children develop and learn and what is known about effective early education. DAP’s framework is designed to promote young children’s optimal learning and development (NAEYC, 2015).

**Play-based learning:** an approach to teaching and learning of concepts and skills where children are engaged in active involvement, autonomy and have opportunity for choice through activities that are active and open-ended (Martlew, Stephen & Ellis, 2011).
**Scripted curricula:** teachers follow a highly regimented and invariable routine, a script, which entails prescribed activities and language without deviation from what is provided (Miller & Almon, 2009, p. 43).

**Teacher perspectives:** what teachers think and do based on their understanding of play-based pedagogy (Fesseh & Pyle, 2016).

**Theoretical Framework**

Developmental theories enlighten our understanding of how children think and behave, as well as how they perceive the world around them. Jean Piaget’s Stages of Cognitive Development and Lev Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) were chosen as a frame for this study as evidence for how children learn relative to the stages of development they experience over time.

These developmental theories support a constructivist, epistemological approach to examining one’s perspectives and beliefs about play-based learning related to one’s lived experience. Constructivism supports the idea that one learns from their interactions between their lived experiences in relationship to their ideas and beliefs. Essential to constructivism is the interactions between the investigator and the object of the investigation, and supports collaboration among the researcher and participant to co-construct findings from their interpretations and dialogue regarding the topic of study (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 129). Early constructivist such as Piaget viewed play and exploration as an important part of children’s development of logical thinking. This idea supports the notion that one’s interactions with real world experiences shapes how an individual internalizes information and constructs new knowledge from those experiences (Dodge, 2010).
The utilization of developmental theories to guide my research provided clear connections between research-based best practices and the type of instructional practices teachers are using, as well as their beliefs related to early childhood training and actual experiences. Developmental theories are relevant when studying the changes children go through over time, as well as when investigating how children learn. Miller (2016) stated that developmental theories describe changes over time in areas such as social behavior, cognition, reasoning, and language. Singer and Revenson (1997) defined development as a biological term, stating that it represents physical growth over time and, when applied to psychology, includes children’s emotions and reasoning.

Contemporary developmental psychology can be traced back to the second half of the nineteenth century, when it was derived from turn-of-the-century biology, philosophy, and pedagogy (Anandalakshmy & Grinder, 1970). The integration of laws of species in evolution theory and the advances in genetic psychology provided the first conceptual links between biology and psychology (Anandalakshmy & Grinder, 1970; Grinder, 1967). The relationship between psychology and biology in developmental psychology, has influenced the work of theorists such as Piaget, and Vygotsky, linking one's social, emotional, and cognitive development to specific stages throughout a lifespan (Anandalakshmy & Grinder, 1970). Contemporary developmental psychology has been the premise for understanding how children develop, based on the connections between specific developmental behaviors one is displaying, in connection to their chronological age (Dodge, 2010).

Piaget contributed to the understanding that development is a function of internal processes equilibration, accommodation, and assimilation, that are dependent on activity and experiences (Anadalakshmy & Grinder, 1970). His work had two major drives, constructivism and stage theory, and he linked mastery of cognitive development to stages in children’s lives (Carey,
Zaitchik & Bascandziev, 2015). Piaget believed that stages of cognitive development are bound to physical development, and that children at a particular stage of development are not capable of reasoning beyond their current developmental stage (Mooney, 2013). Piaget’s research supports the critical relationship, tying rich interactions between young children and their environment, to their overall development, which is supportive of a play-based approach to learning. Piaget claimed that children construct their own knowledge by doing the real work themselves, creating their own understanding of the world around them (Mooney, 2013). Rich interactions between children and adults that support language, cognitive, physical, social and emotional skills are developed through real-world experiences linked to children’s environments.

Vygotsky believed that social and cognitive development work together and build on each other, and that personal and social experience cannot be separated (Mooney, 2013). Vygotsky’s ideas linked personal and social experiences to children's development. He believed the way a child constructs meaning about the world is influenced by their families, culture, education, socioeconomic status and communities (Mooney, 2013). Children's beliefs and understanding about their world is derived from experiences and interactions from adults and other children. Vygotsky believed that interactions among adults and other children contribute to their ability to develop new language and construct new knowledge (Mooney, 2013). Thus, this supports the need for teachers to provide children with experiences that promote interactions among children and with adults within a cultural-historically created context (Oers, 2011). Vygotsky’s work related to the Zone of Proximal Development suggests that the distance between a child’s actual developmental level (determined by independent problem solving) and level of potential development is determined through problem solving with adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Dunn & Lantolf, 1998). This theory suggested the need for quality
interactions with adults and peers to support learning. Vygotsky’s theory of developmental readiness is more flexible than Piaget’s theories because it accepts the notion that children can acquire the skills they have not yet developed on their own with the guidance of peers and adults (Mooney, 2013). Vygotsky understood the importance of social support in advancing one’s ability level. A child performing a task independently would be performing at their functioning level, but with environmental supports such as giving instructions, modeling, or provided familiar material, a child could improve to their optimal level (Demetriou, Shayer & Efklides, 1994).

**Opposing arguments**

During the first half of the nineteenth century, the Western perspective was that the world was populated with people whose essence was fixed at creation; developmental viewpoints were seen as irrelevant (Anandalakshmy & Grinder, 1970). The nature-nurture concept continued to be an issue in contemporary developmental psychology, with theorists drawing on Thorndike (1930), who highlighted how original nature, reflexes, instincts and inner capacities are separate from acquired learned behaviors, habits, and traits (Anandalakshmy & Grinder, 1970). This supported the idea that in education, genetic factors were more significant in the learning process toward improvements. The nature versus nurture argument supports the idea that genetics are more prevalent than maturity over time, in one's ability to acquire knowledge. This would suggest that factors in developmental theories such as developmental milestones based on chronological age and social interactions within one's environment, are less significant that one's inherent ability to acquire knowledge.

There are opposing arguments to Piaget’s stage theory. Researchers reject his theory based on the grounds that stage theory is too heterogeneous; they claim that wide variations exist
regarding the age at which individuals from different cultural backgrounds acquire a specific stage within the stage theory framework (Niaz, 1998). When considering theories, educators must also take into consideration children’s cultural identities. Theories should be used creatively and critically, incorporating cultural, societal, and personal needs of children (Oers, 2011).

Developmental Theories and The Role of the Teacher

Developmental theories were used to highlight the importance of play in kindergarten classrooms, as well as examine teacher’s perspectives and beliefs about play. Teachers understanding of developmental theories and their contributions to developmentally appropriate practices, impacts the level of high engagement environments that are created in early childhood classrooms (Hedge, Sugita, Crane-Mitchell & Averett, 2014). Developmentally appropriate practices in early childhood classrooms encompass learning through play-based environments that are facilitated by the teacher. The teacher's role is essential to play-based learning environments, and how teachers view themselves in the process of play is essential to creating sustainable play environments. Through the research questions, I was able to gauge if specific predictors aligned to play and developmental theories, such as child and adult interactions connected to real world experiences, are evident in teachers’ current practices. I was also able to determine if developmental appropriateness of teacher beliefs and practices are influenced by outside factors such as parents and administration (Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2006).

Application to Study

The use of developmental theories in my study reinforced the need to shift instructional practices in kindergarten. Developmental theories provide educators and program developers with a frame of reference tied to children’s chronological ages, typical development behaviors,
and how they learn best (Dodge, 2010). The theory also provides a general framework for understanding child development and the importance of play to children’s development (Gullo & Huges, 2010). Developmental theories provided a point of reference for appropriate methods of teaching and learning for high engagement environments, as well as illuminated the teacher’s role in those environments.

Early childhood teachers are trained on early childhood best practices which are aligned to the stages of child development. The implementation of early childhood best practices is essential to children’s social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development. The ideas and beliefs of developmental theorists are woven throughout early childhood curricula, and mark the standard for developmentally appropriate teacher and instructional play-based practices. Play-based pedagogies are understood as occurring along a continuum of learning that is facilitated by the teacher during play experiences (Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2013). Although kindergarten curriculum has been reshaped due to pressure to meet inappropriate expectations set forth by external academic expectations, the fundamental developmental characteristics of kindergarten children has remained the same (Gullo & Hughes, 2010; Miller & Almon, 2009). The study of developmental theorists and play pedagogy are critical components of early childhood teacher preparation programs, and have influenced positive perceptions of play in curriculum (Jung & Jin, 2012). While examining teachers’ perceptions and beliefs about play in kindergarten classrooms, developmental theories served as a guide to measure teachers’ understandings, conceptual knowledge, and implementation level regarding play, as well as framed the research questions. Although my aim was to uncover teachers’ beliefs and perceptions about play, developmental theories provided a framework for supporting the deeper issue of employing instructional practices that best support the overall development of kindergarten children.
I conducted a qualitative study illustrating the subjects lived experiences. Through this process, I was able to link kindergarten teachers’ experiences to their choice of instructional methods, while uncovering their perspectives about play in the classroom (Seidman, 2006). While crafting my interview questions, developmental theories assisted in providing me with a guide to frame each question around views and experiences of teachers related to developmentally appropriate instructional practices.

**Summary**

The exploration of developmental theories has increased my knowledge of child development as well as provided me with a conceptual framework for uncovering meaningful and appropriate learning experiences for children in kindergarten. In terms of the current research, my aim was to influence curriculum decisions at the school and district level, and to seek opportunities to initiate the facilitation of discussions around kindergarten curriculum and early childhood policy, to ensure equal access to high quality education for all children. To initiate this shift, dialogue must take place with all stakeholders who share a common interest and investment in kindergarten at the local, state, and federal level. Gorski (2014) suggested that ideology drives policy; if we want to change educational inequities then we must have more equitable ideology. Not all actors who influence early childhood policy share the same understanding of child development related to developmentally appropriate teacher and instructional practices. In order for kindergarten programs to reach their optimum potential, there must be a universal understanding of the interrelated association of theory, research, practice, and policy (Gullo & Hughes, 2010). My work to afford all kindergarten children with high quality learning experiences involved examining educators’ values related to curriculum development and early childhood policy.
When I first chose developmental theories, I believed one major limitation would be that external factors, such as academic expectations and administrative influence, would not necessarily be uncovered by the theories. However, after reflecting on the tenets of the theories and the context of the study, I feel these factors may be symptoms of a systematic lack of conceptual knowledge of child development and early childhood best practices. Developmental theories acted as a guide to measure the appropriateness of instructional and assessment practices that are required by administrators, that could be reflective of achievement pressures and a way to control learning. Utilizing developmental theories such as Piaget’s Stages of Cognitive Development and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, provided insight to how kindergarten age children best acquire and internalize new knowledge. Vygotsky and Piaget agree that play and language are vital to kindergarten children's learning and that personal experiences are key to constructing knowledge. As this study sought to explore how teachers’ perceptions and experiences influence the implementation of play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms, it is critical to understand how children best learn through examining the problem through the lens of developmental theories.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore how teachers’ perspectives and experiences in kindergarten classrooms influence the implementation of play-based learning. The implementation of play-based learning and developmentally appropriate practices in kindergarten are critical to young children’s academic success and healthy development (Jachyra & Fusco, 2014). In recent years’, kindergarten teachers have expressed their concern of a lack of time for unstructured play and discovery, due to the amount of time that is required for literacy and numeracy instruction and taking tests (Miller & Almon, 2009). The current trend being imposed on children in kindergarten classrooms towards standardized curriculum and test-based content has led to an increase of direct instruction and less time for children to play and explore (Wood, 2014).

Implementing developmentally appropriate practices in kindergarten is vital to developing and sustaining high quality programs and nurturing children’s development (Jachyra & Fusco, 2014). The research identified the importance of play to children’s development and learning. Play supports multiple domains of development such as cognitive, language, physical, social, emotional, and children’s overall well-being (Wood, 2014). The Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2009) guidelines, strongly recommends teachers develop in providing children with experiences, materials, and interactions that allow them to engage in play. Play experiences allow children to stretch their boundaries to the fullest in their imagination, language, interactions, and self-regulation. The value of play has become progressively recognized by researchers, as well as educational policy makers, with continuing
evidence of its relationship with intellectual achievement and emotional well-being (Whitebread, Basilio, Kuvalija & Verma, 2012).

The Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge grant, has acted as a vehicle for school districts across the nation to transform their kindergarten programs into developmentally appropriate, play-based learning environments (Scott-little, Bruner & Schultz, 2011). Developing Kindergarten Entry Assessments is a significant component of the RTT-ELC grant. The participants in this study are the initial kindergarten teachers who participated in the New Jersey Kindergarten Entry Assessment initiative. The focus of the initiative was to create kindergarten spaces where teachers were able to capture organic learning through play that supported high engagement activities, utilizing an observation-based assessment tool. The implementation of this initiative was a shift in the way kindergarten classrooms functioned and required professional development for teachers and administrators in the areas of curriculum, assessment, and early childhood best practices. Although the shift in practice is much needed, teachers face a challenge when required to implement scripted curricula and didactic instruction and assessment practices (Pyle & DeLuca, 2013).

The literature review served as a vehicle to explore kindergarten seminar teachers (KS) implementation of play-based learning in their classrooms. To accomplish this, it is important to understand the benefits of play as well as possible challenges teachers encounter that inhibit the creation of play-based learning environments. Two major themes emerged while reviewing the research, teachers’ beliefs related to developmentally appropriate practices, and curriculum requirements and academic expectations. Each theme had critical subsets that will be discussed in the literature review.
Teachers Beliefs and Understanding of DAP

Teachers today are faced with conflicting ideas of what developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) looks like in the kindergarten classroom, while facing growing accountability demands and pressure with curriculum and testing expectations (Pyle & Bigelow, 2014). Teachers come with varying understandings and beliefs regarding DAP such as cultural and pedagogical beliefs, which affects the level of active engagement children are exposed to while learning (Hedge, Sugita, Crane-Mitchell & Averett, 2014). Some view play as strictly a free play experience, whereas others connect play experiences to a more complex system of developing vital academic and cognitive skills (Pyle & Bigelow, 2014). Contributing to teachers varying perceptions of play and developmentally appropriate practices, is the matter of how best to conceptualize play. Play has been defined as being multifaceted encompassing elements of emotional experiences and pleasure, to considering the neurological perspective connecting brain size and activity, and general cognitive development (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016). Varying definitions of play based on differing theoretical lenses, has created the challenge of teachers understanding their role in play, therefore, hindering the implementation of play-based programs (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016). Play-based learning environments have been viewed as non-rigorous and non-supportive of current kindergarten academic expectations, while high-stakes testing and test preparation have taken the place of observational and curriculum embedded performance assessments (Miller & Almon, 2009). Due to such beliefs and practices, there is a lack of play in kindergarten classrooms which has hindered the level of active engagement and flexible learning environments that children are exposed to (Miller & Almon, 2009). Teachers’ inability to provide children with play-based, experiential learning opportunities has made it difficult to assess children in
engaging, organic environments in order to measure children’s true levels of understanding of developmental and academic skills.

Teacher training to support play-based learning environments is vital to meeting academic expectations in an appropriate way while creating a healthy learning environment that addresses children's developmental and academic needs. In order for in-service training to affect the changing of actual curriculum approaches and instructional methods, more applied approaches need to be embedded, as well as follow-up support (Masari & Petrovici, 2014). Training on how to capture children’s learning while engaged in play is essential to addressing the validity of observation-based assessments to ensure accuracy in identifying children’s abilities. To assist in the process of creating high quality kindergarten programs, the use of programmatic assessment tools to measure the level of implementation of DAP, will provide kindergarten teachers and administrators with valuable feedback to improve classroom practices by increasing their understanding and knowledge of early childhood best practices (Horn & Ramey, 2004).

The Value of Play

The value of play has been championed by developmental theorists such as Vygotsky, linking children’s development and the development of all mankind to interactions among people and their social environment (Edwards & Cutter-Machenzi, 2013). Through play, young children are able to engage in rich learning connected to tangible materials and real-world experiences, resulting in new knowledge and understanding of the world around them (Edwards & Cutter-Machenzi, 2013). Play is vital for brain, cognitive, linguistic, physical, philological, social-emotional development and well-being, and ignites creativity and imagination in young children (Wood, 2014). Play-based learning environments reflect practices that encourage students to interact with materials in ways that allow them to construct new knowledge (Edwards & Cutter-
Mackenzie, 2013). Play-based environments are most effective when teachers facilitate learning while students explore with materials, as a way to scaffold learning (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016).

The value of play is becoming more apparent in the educational arena, as it relates to children’s academic achievement, social and emotional development, and overall well-being. In addition to fostering success in academic areas such as math and literacy, play assists children with learning how to cooperate with others and develop socially appropriate behaviors (Lynch, 2015; Bordova, Germeroth, & Leong 2013; Elberle 2011). The current position on play can be attributed to evidence that has emerged from evolutionary psychology stating; through evolution more complex animals evolved with increased brain size, associated with longer periods of biological immaturity, along with increased playfulness (Whitebread, Basilio, Kuvalja & Verma, 2012; Bruner, 1972). Play is beneficial from a neurological perspective because of sensory and neurotransmitter stimulation advantages, contributions to brain size and activity, as well as general cognitive development (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016). Play-based learning provides children with the experiences and resources they need to learn about their interactions with the world (Jachyra & Fusco, 2016; Gestwicki, 2007). Play-based learning environments create free spaces for children to learn through exploration and real-world experiences, making learning meaningful and engaging for children. When children are able to experience learning through relatable experiences, they are able to construct knowledge that make sense in their world and internalize information. Dewey (1938) denotes the new philosophy of education recognizes there is an intimate and necessary relationship between the process of actual experience of students and education.

Developmental theorists such as Vygotsky, have contributed to the development of areas such as creativity, reasoning, executive function, and regulation of emotions, to quality social
interactions among children and adults (Brodrova, Germeroth & Leong, 2013). Social interactions and co-construction during play are necessary for supporting children’s knowledge construction, as well as the role of combinatorial activity (Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2013). Vygotsky’s idea of combinational activity provides insight to the construction of conceptual knowledge of children through adult and child interactions during play, and considers the importance of both the rich contexts in children’s learning, as well as what the teacher needs to do prior to play that supports the construction of conceptual knowledge, supporting sustainability in education (Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2013).

Play environments assist children in reaching their maximum developmental and neurological potential by nurturing and contributing to physical, emotional, psychological, and social development (Wood, 2014; Brown & Vaughan, 2009). Children engaged in play experiences are provided opportunities to use their imaginations, experiment with role playing, and creatively and symbolically play with objects (Wood, 2014). Allowing children to engage in play experiences nurtures and scaffolds creativity, imagination, optimism, coping, resilience, and social emotional development, essential to the overall healthy development of the whole child (Wood, 2014). Play has also been linked to advances in verbalization, vocabulary, language comprehension, impulse control, curiosity, problem solving strategies, cooperation, empathy and group participation, as well as assisting children in mastering academic content in literacy and numeracy in kindergarten (Miller & Almon, 2009).

**Teacher Training and DAP**

Teachers’ personal and professional knowledge of child development influences the quality of appropriate classroom practices that occur (Heisner & Lederberg, 2010). One of the challenges presented in today’s attempt to transform kindergarten classrooms is that many younger teachers
did not grow up with a strong experience of child-initiated play (Miller & Almon, 2009). With a lack of play experiences, young teachers will not understand play’s powerful nature and its role in effective kindergarten education (Miller & Almon, 2009). College preparatory teacher programs that include coursework focused on play, have a significant role in future teachers’ intentions to implement play in their classrooms (Jung & Jin, 2014). Although play coursework is commonly studied by future early childhood professionals, there are variables to consider linked to play coursework that influence future professionals such as teacher perceptions and intention to integrate play (Jung & Jin, 2014). Perceptions of play held by college students in early childhood programs is not consistent from freshmen to seniors, although both hold play as important and needing to be valued, junior year and beyond view play as only potentially helpful in children’s learning (Jung & Jin, 2012).

Professional development of teachers is a critical condition in today’s knowledge-based society, in order to sustain quality teaching (Gianina, 2013). Teacher training is essential to effective implementation of DAP to support early childhood best practices. Teacher beliefs are at the center of teacher decision-making and what happens in the classroom (Heisner & Lederberg, 2010). Teacher training provides educators with information to deepen their understanding of research-based theory and practice, allowing for the construction of new knowledge related to their specialty area, and influences practices in the classroom (Jung & Jin, 2014).

Lee, Baik and Charlesworth (2006) examined teachers’ implementation of DAP in kindergarten classrooms and divided teachers into two groups based on what they believed about developmentally appropriate practice after receiving an in-service workshop. The two groups were identified as either developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) or developmentally
inappropriate practice (DIP). After teacher training was provided there was significantly greater improvement on a scaffolding measure of DAP teachers, opposed to DIP teachers. Teacher training on early childhood best practices is necessary for effective implementation of play-based environments. There is a significant need to train teachers on meaningful teacher-child interactions that facilitate learning, as well as extend and scaffold the understanding of skills and concepts, to accurately assess through observation what children have internalized and can apply. Roorda, Koomen, Thijs and Oort (2013) highlighted the effects of using interpersonal theory and the complementary principal, as the basis for training teachers on meaningful interactions with children. This model raised teachers’ level of awareness regarding how they expressed their thoughts through comments and questioning, affected children’s approaches to learning (Roorda, Koomen, Thijs & Oort, 2013). Fernandez, Adelstein, Miller, Areizaga, Gold, Sanchez, Rothschild, Hirsch & Gudino (2015) concluded that after teacher-child interactions training, teachers showed a significant decrease in their use of negative attention towards students through the use of techniques that reinforce academic learning, and can be used to support learning prosocial behaviors as well.

Making real-life practical connections during in-service training for teachers is critical to enact change. Teachers often express dissatisfaction with in-service workshops due to the structure being at a formal level and less focused on the real needs of teachers (Gianina, 2013). In order to effectively implement play-based kindergarten environments, early childhood formal training programs will need to be developed that support equilibrium between professional competences and transversal competences such as fundamentals of pedagogy, educational research methodology and instructional theory and methodology, in order to have well qualified teachers in early grades (Petrovici & Masari, 2014). Hendy and Barlow (2012) pointed out
creating “champions” such as a guiding team, to lead change and motivate others is essential in supporting the process as long as they are consistently part of the planning and implementation of the change.

Programmatic assessment tools used to measure kindergarten program quality also provide teachers with guidance on improving appropriate instructional practices and assessment methods that support early learners. The Assessment of Practice in Early Education Classrooms (APEEC) is used in kindergarten classrooms to guide teachers to self-reflect on their practice and raise program quality. Maxwell, McWilliam, Hemmeter, Ault and Schuster (2001) conducted research to assess the psychometric components of a new observation tool (APEEC) to measure developmentally appropriate classroom practices in kindergarten through third-grade classrooms. Curriculum content was not included in the study since the objective was to assess DAP components that could be observed in classroom environments in kindergarten through third grade. The research revealed, the APEEC is a valid measure of rating developmentally appropriate practices, as well as uncovered that kindergarten and first grade classrooms were more developmentally appropriate than second and third grade classrooms, based on different factors such as classroom size, teacher beliefs, and years of experience (Maxwell et al, 2001). Developmentally appropriate practices focus on the overall development of the child, as well as the needs of the individual children in the group, where play is highly valued as an opportunity for learning (Heisner & Lederberg, 2010). A critical component to transforming kindergarten programs through a reflective teacher process, is the use of early childhood programmatic assessments that measure DAP.
Teachers Varying Perspectives

The literature reveals there are varying levels of teachers’ understanding of developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) in relationship to instructional practices and assessments in kindergarten. Teachers’ perceptions of play can significantly affect their decisions regarding classroom practice, and can be changed through education (Jung & Jin, 2014). Not all teachers share a common understanding of play-based learning as it relates to active involvement, autonomy and the opportunity for choice, thus leading to various levels of engagement and methods of assessments utilized (Martlew, Stephen & Ellis, 2011). The research revealed there are varying inconsistencies among teachers related to definitions of play and implementation of play in kindergarten classrooms, describing the act of play as something that is separate from learning (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016). Fresseha & Pyle (2016) conducted a study with Ontario teachers to gain insights on how they defined play-based learning, and how their perspectives influenced the implementation of play in kindergarten classrooms. The participants included 101 elementary teachers from the province of Ontario, who engaged in a 49 question survey consisting of six questions related to demographics and 43 related to play, as well as six open ended questions. The results revealed that 91% of the teacher participants believed that play had always been a part of their practice, but only 19% of the participants identified play as being part of their current classroom practices. The results revealed inconsistencies in kindergarten teachers’ definitions and implementation of play in their classrooms. Although play is recognized as an important element to the overall development of students, the lack of a concrete definition of play-based learning can result in the absence of intentional integration of academic skills ((Fesseha & Pyle, 2016). Although kindergarten teachers shared positive beliefs about play and have always included play in their practice, current expectations in kindergarten caused
a shift in the way most teachers address instructional practices. Through teachers open ended responses on the survey, the study revealed there were inconsistencies with teachers conceptual understanding of play, and how those inconsistencies affected the implementation of play in classrooms. Challenges that contributed to their beliefs or perceptions of play ranged from the challenge of time, which was the most notable, to academic curricular challenges and assessments that limited teacher engagement in play (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016). Inconsistencies in definitions of play and DAP, as well as different perspectives regarding the purpose of play and the use of embedded curriculum assessments in early childhood classrooms, make it difficult for teachers to determine how to effectively implement appropriate instructional practices and assessments in their classrooms (Pyle & Bigelow, 2014). Pedagogical play includes an intentional focus on the role of the teacher as facilitator of learning during children’s play as a support for learning, rather than a didactic or traditional teacher-oriented approach (Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2013).

The research examining teachers’ beliefs and practices regarding developmentally appropriate practices related to instructional practices and assessments in early childhood classrooms, is identified and defined based on teachers’ cultural and educational context as per the revised NAEYC position statement on DAP (Hegde, Sugita, Crane-Mitchell & Averett, 2014). The revised position statement on DAP cautions researchers to not blindly apply DAP standards as it is within other countries, but should instead use DAP as a guideline for reinterpretation within a cultural context (Hegde, Sugita, Crane-Mitchell & Averett, 2014). This research examined Japanese teachers’ beliefs and practices of DAP through the collection of in-depth interview data. This study explored a total of 10 Japanese nursery and kindergarten teacher’s beliefs and instructional practices regarding developmentally appropriate practices (DAP). Based on teacher
beliefs and training aligned to the educational systems in Japan, there were six themes that emerged from the study. First, play is learning; 2. physical and social development is of utmost importance; 3. the teacher is an observer, facilitator and role model; 4. assigning roles and tasks is common in every classroom; 5. individual and group activities are interchangeable; 6. the process is involved in the proposed merger of two seemingly divergent curricula, care and education (Hedge, Sugita, Crane-Mitchell & Averett, 2014). Japanese teachers believed a play-based curriculum is all-encompassing and supports all domains of development (Hedge et al., 2014).

Teacher’s beliefs and understandings of those beliefs influence classroom practices. Overall teacher beliefs and practices in this study were in sync with what is considered to be developmentally appropriate core principles of a play-based curriculum as understood in the United States (Hedge et al., 2014). Different cultural and social values of teacher’s beliefs and practices in Japan impacted teacher’s ability to embody a true early childhood setting that supported a play-based environment to address the development of the whole child. The implications of this study suggest, the need to consider early childhood settings within specific countries to understand different influences of teacher beliefs and practices regarding DAP (Hedge et al., 2014). It also suggests play-based environments support high quality peer and adult interactions in a rich learning environment that addresses both academic and developmental domains of learning.

**Conclusion: Teacher Beliefs and Understanding of DAP**

The implementation of developmentally appropriate practices may not look consistent across kindergarten classrooms due to teachers’ understandings, beliefs, and level of training. There are also inconsistencies with teachers understanding of what active engagement looks like in kindergarten classrooms. Teachers’ understanding and experience with engaging children in
intentionally planned play-based learning that supports high levels of engagement, impacts the ability to observe consistent levels of implementation across kindergarten classrooms. Factors such as level of training, class size, curriculum and assessment requirements, and program structure have an impact on teachers’ level of DAP implementation. Throughout the literature, teachers understanding and beliefs regarding DAP impacted classroom practices.

Teacher training, experience and understanding of the value of play was also a consistent theme regarding the implementation of developmentally appropriate practices among kindergarten teachers. Teachers with focused training that incorporated a practical application component had a higher level of DAP implementation in their classrooms, while the use of programmatic assessment tools provide valuable information for teachers and administrators to enhance early childhood best practices in kindergarten classrooms.

**Curricular Requirements and Academic Expectations**

Over the last decade, a visible implementation of inappropriate practices in kindergarten has transpired due to the academic kindergarten birthed through the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (Miller & Almon, 2009). Giroux (1994) discussed the idea of the language of curriculum being both historical and contingent, and dialog surrounding teaching and curriculum should not be removed from considerations of history, power, and politics. The discussion further suggests curriculum is influenced by politics such as our governments and local school boards.

The transformation of kindergarten started slowly by removing learning center furniture and materials such as dramatic play, blocks, and art easels, to passing out dittos and imposing paper-pencil and computerized testses (Miller & Almon, 2009). As we move toward a more inquiry-based approach to teaching to support the development of 21st century skills, teachers are challenged with implementing developmentally appropriate instructional practices and
assessment methods while trying to meet scripted curricular and testing requirements in kindergarten (Miller & Almon, 2009). Critics of scripted curricula and teaching and assessment methods argue that it compromises teacher-child relationships and is based on a simplistic and unsound model of how children learn in the early years (Miller & Almon, 2009). Early childhood curriculum is complex and considers the learner’s interests and social and cultural identities. Scripted curricula in classrooms stifle teacher’s ability to create learning opportunities for children connected to their lives and interests. Schools often socialize children to a set of expectations that are more powerful than what is made explicit and public, suggesting what they don’t teach maybe more important than what they do teach (Eisner, 2002). National conversations continue to unfold regarding the variances and commonalities related to what young children should know and be able to do in order to be prepared for school success (Daily, Burkhauser & Halle, 2011).

**Curriculum Challenges**

Kindergarten teachers’ express frustration when trying to achieve academic expectations in relationship to curriculum and assessments, while meeting children’s developmental needs. Schuab (1983) suggested curriculum is not the same for all children and stresses the four commonplaces of education (teacher, student, what is taught and the milieu of teaching – learning) are of intrinsically equal importance. In today’s kindergarten world, teachers are challenged with the pressure of implementing inappropriate programs while trying to tend to young children’s social, emotional, and cognitive developmental needs. Pui-Wah and Stimpson (2004) uncovered Hong Kong teachers’ professional challenges of adopting creative, child-centered pedagogy using a play-based approach.
This was an in-depth qualitative study conducted with six Hong Kong kindergarten teachers where data was collected over a years-time through interviews and classroom observations. Teacher’s process of framing and reframing reflection and action was tracked for a year. Although teachers sought to include play in their daily practice, their thinking was often rigid and mechanical (Pui-Wah & Stimpson, 2004). The following findings contributed to a lack of play in Hong Kong kindergarten classrooms, (1) Teacher’s personal knowledge of play, (2) Conflict between the rhetoric and reality of play, (3) A play-work dichotomy, (4) The routinization of practice, (5) Enactment of play-based learning in practice, (6) A technical orientation, (7) A fluctuating orientation, (8) An inquiry orientation. Examining teachers’ knowledge assists in better understanding the challenges and difficulties they face, as well as provides ways to identify actionable practices in supporting limitations of play pedagogy (Pui-Wah & Stimpson, 2004).

Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett (2006) identified three different groups of kindergarten teachers while examining their beliefs about their instructional practice and what they feel impacts their practice, (1) teacher-directed or didactic, (2) child-centered or developmentally appropriate and (3) teachers who use both methods. There are specific reasons and consistencies as to why teachers fell into these three groups such as, pressure to prepare children for the next grade, or the feeling of having to follow a scripted curriculum versus those who were able to implement a more child-centered approach (Parker & Neuharth, 2006). Teachers in his study believed kindergarten had become significantly more academic and identified the pressure to get students ready for the next grade level, as the cause for the shift in their instructional approach (Parker & Neuharth, 2006). Academic expectations and high stakes testing continues to drive inappropriate practices in kindergarten classrooms, influencing teachers’ curricular stance (Lynch, 2015).
Kindergarten teacher’s face the daily struggle of trying to balance their own pedagogical beliefs regarding play-based learning and the use of appropriate assessments, while managing curriculum expectations (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016). Contributing to kindergarten teacher’s curricular stance is the change in academic expectations in kindergarten (Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2009). Formal academic teacher-directed instruction has dominated the need to engage children in active learning based on socialization, imagination, and creativity, making kindergarten curriculum development more narrowly defined and content-oriented (Gullo & Hughes, 2010). Kindergarten teachers conform to using inappropriate methods of teaching and assessing due to administrative pressures to implement a one size fits all brand of kindergarten (Gullo & Hughes, 2010). This can also be contributed to a lack of understanding of how to teach and assess using developmentally appropriate practices, given the required curriculum. Compounding teachers’ stance regarding developmentally appropriate practices, is the increase in accountability for achieving high test scores (Lynch, 2015). High-stakes test and benchmark test scores are now linked to summative evaluation ratings for teachers and impact salary increments, potentially influencing teachers’ curricular values. Kindergarten teachers and children experience great pressure to meet inappropriate expectations mirrored in external standards in the higher grades (Gullo & Hughes, 2010; Miller & Almon, 2009).

Due to external pressures from policy makers and administrators, kindergarten teachers are becoming their own researchers, grasping for supportive mentors, colleagues, and administrators in an effort to develop a voice and advocate for developmentally appropriate practices in kindergarten classrooms (Wood, 2014). Agencies such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) act as a point of reference for teachers to support dialog and defend their practice.


Teaching and Assessing in a Play-Based Curriculum

Teaching in a play-based curriculum in the early grades has been a topic of relevance and concern as the increasing demand for economically valuable outcomes and accountability, has led to a more teacher driven approach (Oers & Dijkers, 2013). The literature examines the possibilities of teaching and assessing in a play-based curriculum and emphasized a need for the education and training of teachers, to ensure valid implementation (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016). It also accentuates the concept of learning and development can incorporate goal-directed teaching and learning through the context of role-play under the guidance of knowledgeable teachers (Oers & Dijkers, 2013). Oers and Dijkers (2013) used Vygotskian tenets of developmental education to guide their work. Vygotsky’s theories support a child-centered approach to teaching rather than teacher-directed stating; the human mind develops through social interactions which supports play as a valuable context for learning and teaching.

Kindergarten teachers are faced with attending to the current accountability framework of public education, while trying to balance traditional developmental programming and current academically oriented curriculum (Pyle & DeLuca, 2013). Teachers’ express a high number of academic curricular expectations and emphasis on assessment make it difficult to find the time for play and teacher engagement in that play (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016). Edwards and Cutter-Mackenzie (2013) discussed the relevance and need for explicit teacher planning as an important aspect of early childhood sustainability and for supporting of conceptual learning to ensure children are provided with rich learning experiences. The study examined how three different types of play-based pedagogy (open-ended, modelled and purposely framed play) influence teaches planning for children learning about biodiversity as a subset of sustainability education.
This was a qualitative study where data was taken from reflective journals as well as planning
and curriculum documents. Participants included 16 teachers whose teaching experience ranged from four to twenty-five years, and six of the teachers had an existing interest in teaching sustainability. The researchers were interested in uncovering the range of pedagogical strategies teachers purposely planned to use to support learner engagement with conceptual ideas (Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2013). The findings revealed that out of the 16 teachers only one teacher provided children with play experiences that included materials supportive of a sustainability concept and provided opportunities for open-ended play. Play-based curriculum suggest that play should be incorporated in all subject areas in preschool through third grade, however, the research indicates as children progress through school towards grade three, play-based learning disappears across all subject areas and traditional methods of teaching are imposed (Jachyra & Fusco, 2014). Jachyra and Fusco (2014) conducted an inductive qualitative study of six Ontario early childhood educators using descriptive in-depth interviews, examining teachers’ experiences implementing a play-based curriculum. The results uncovered evidence of paper pencil pedagogies re-appearing as students progressed towards grade three, due to teachers feeling the need to prepare students for standardized tests (Jachyra & Fusco, 2014; People for Education 2013a). Although play pedagogy is championed by educational stakeholders, educators continue to find the balance between play-based learning and mandatory standardized testing expectations (Jachyra & Fusco, 2014). Although all teachers believed in the connection between play and children’s overall wellbeing, conflicting messages between policy and practice had an impact on their instructional practices (Jachyra & Fusco, 2014). The implication of this study suggests a need for consistent messages between educational expectations and practice, in order for sustainable play-based approaches to learning to exist in early childhood classrooms.
Steber, Vogt, Wolf, Hauser and Rechsteiner (2013) explored the use of board games in a play-based learning environment to teach mathematics in early grades as being an effective method for teaching and reinforcing skills, as well as providing an adaptive and motivating setting to meet the needs of low and high achieving children. The analysis encompassed aspects of mathematical behavior (content), playing (method), and peer interactions, and revealed that although the students were talkative during the activity, the discussions focused on the game and mathematical operations (Steber, Vogt, Wolf, Hauser & Rechsteiner, 2013). One can conclude from this study that when students are engaged in purposeful play activities, students are highly engaged in the learning tasks. Classrooms that engage children in play-based learning experiences, differentiated learning experiences, and utilize tactile objects, manipulatives, experiential learning, and technologies, which are thought to stimulate learning, experience an increase in student achievement (Jachyra & Fusco, 2014). Gallo and Hughes (2010) highlighted the importance of active engagement to how children learn best stating, many kindergartens use highly scripted curricula geared toward standardized tests, which is not grounded in research and violates good teaching and the principles of child development. Kindergarten children find school to be boring due to the fact that there is little time spent in exploration and play and more time spent on following prescriptive curriculum geared toward standardized tests (Gallo & Hughes, 2010).

Pyle and DeLuca’s (2013) work examined teachers use of kindergarten assessment data to measure and report children’s learning as it relates to academically driven curriculum, while balancing and maintaining a play-based approach to learning and traditional developmental programs. Three separate assessment approaches emerged from the results: (1) developmental assessment approach, (2) blended assessment approach, and (3) assessment for learning
approach. Results revealed that kindergarten teachers were able to find a balance between their own pedagogical beliefs and the academic standards-based movement (Pyle & DeLuca, 2013). Although some kindergarten teachers find challenges with adopting child-centered pedagogy in the age of accountability, others are able to maintain enough pedagogical autonomy to tailor academic mandates under the accountability framework in order to fit their curricular stance (Pyle & DeLuca, 2013). Teachers in this study did not allow the standardized curriculum to guide learning for all students. Instead, teachers adapted their instructional approaches by using the curriculum as a building block or standard for learning and focused on incorporating appropriate foundational skills necessary to reach curricular goals (Pyle & DeLuca, 2013). Teachers’ level of conceptual knowledge of play-based learning influences their ability to navigate challenges of creating high engagement play environments in their classrooms (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016).

Political Influences

The 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was created to address accountability in the American school system due to a drastic drop in test scores (Lynch, 2015). Although NCLB does not apply to kindergarten, the obsession to prepare children to perform well on standardized tests trickled down into kindergarten classrooms, diminishing time for play (Lynch, 2015). There is an increasingly growing concern with the validity of benchmark data to categorize children in kindergarten related to children’s lack of test taking experience, limited attention spans, and development of children is rapid and variable (Miller & Almon, 2009). In an effort to restore developmentally appropriate instructional and assessment practices in the early grades, the state of New Jersey opted to apply for the Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge grant. States that applied for federal funds through the RTT-ELC were provided the
option of proposing how they would develop a kindergarten entry assessment (KEA), 35 out of 37 states chose to include KEA’s in their proposal for the grant (Scott-Little, 2015). States that chose to expand a statewide KEA would need to align their assessment with early learning standards and cover all domains of school readiness which include: language and literacy; cognition including mathematics and early scientific development; approaches to learning; physical well-being and motor development (Scott-Little & Schultz, 2008).

The purpose of the Kindergarten Entry Assessment initiative (KEA) is to provide states with data at the kindergarten level to show how children’s early learning experiences have or have not supported their development and learning, as well as provide baseline data for instructional purposes and a means of measuring future progress (Scott-Little, Bruner & Schultz, 2011). Kindergarten entry assessments are used as a method of identifying and determining children showing at-risk academic performance and social, emotional, and behavioral problems (Owens, Storer, Holdaway, Serrano, Watabe, Himawan, Krelko & Vause, 2015). Through a review of the literature regarding kindergarten assessments, various uses of the data were uncovered and can provide information to educators such as predictors of reading success of children in future grade levels, and the need to change instructional practices (Juul, Poulsen & Elbro, 2014). Identifying these factors early in kindergarten will assist with instructional planning to effectively meet individual needs of children and address their developmental needs.

Socioeconomic factors are relevant when discussing the use of a kindergarten entry assessment when addressing the gap between economically disadvantaged children and their affluent peers. It is important to consider the significant achievement gap between low-income children and their affluent peers when discussing children’s development and school readiness (Daily, Burkhauser & Halle, 2011). As policy makers come to understand education’s role in the
healthy development of young children, the guidance for kindergarten programs has come to emphasize the importance of play to children’s health and overall well-being (Miller & Almon, 2009).

As part of the KEA initiative, the state of New Jersey developed a kindergarten seminar to train teachers on developmentally appropriate practices such as play-based learning and observation-based assessment practices. Teaching Strategies, LLC was selected as the observation-based assessment tool that would be used to support the KEA initiative in the state of New Jersey. Observation-based assessments capture authentic learning as it unfolds naturally in high engagement, play-based environments. Observation-based assessments in kindergarten are supported by safe learning environments that promote exploration accompanied by an intentional selection of materials that support and challenge children’s skills (Gullo & Hughes, 2010). Developmentally appropriate assessments such as observations, portfolios, and work samples are recommended as a more valid means of capturing children’s learning at the kindergarten level (Miller & Almon, 2009). Play-based environments support the utilization of observation-based assessments used for KEA’s, making identifying children’s ability levels more accurate and reliable. Although this is a critical component to the NJ KEA initiative, there has been a lack of support for teachers and school districts when it comes to transitioning their current assessment practices to ones that reflect an ongoing observation-based assessment tool.

**Conclusion: Curricular Requirements and Academic Expectations**

Teacher’s ability to implement developmentally appropriate practices and play-based methods of instruction in their classrooms are influenced by multiple factors. Based on teachers’ experience and curricular requirements and expectations some teachers feel a play-based method does not support their program. Purposeful planning is critical to developing and sustaining high
quality learning experiences that are aligned to curricular requirements, in play-based flexible physical environments. Kindergarten requirements have changed over the past few years, raising the academic bar and making teachers feel the pressure of meeting high curricular expectations related to literacy and math (Gullo & Hughes 2010). As a result of these demands, teachers may be exposed to normative pressure driving them to focus on academic training versus areas of cognitive and social emotional development (Russell, 2011). Pressure to attain high academic expectations supportive of higher grades and the need to follow scripted curricula impacts teachers’ ability to implement play experiences that support children’s academic success, as well as social emotional, cognitive, language, and physical development. Kindergarten teachers attempt to affirm their beliefs regarding play and best practices in early childhood classrooms, and navigate a play approach to learning in the age of accountability and high academic expectations set forth by the framework of NCLB Act of 2001, policy makers, and administrators. Early childhood agencies who influence policy such as NAEYC are used as a point of reference for teachers to develop a voice and defend their practice (Wood, 2014).

Kindergarten entry assessments are used to determine a variety of factors for children such as school readiness, measuring outcomes and progress, determining instructional methods as well as determining program quality and policy decisions. The research has shown the importance of using kindergarten assessment data to support children’s development and reinforces the importance of assessing children in natural settings through observation-based assessments.

Summary

The research reveals teacher’s curricular stance in relationship to the implementation of play-based methods of teaching and learning depends on one’s understanding and ability to implement developmentally appropriate approaches to teaching and assessing, while maintaining
curricular and academic expectations. Teacher training is essential to creating and sustaining high engagement, play-based environments in kindergarten. Through play, children are able to draw on prior knowledge and construct new knowledge connected to social interactions and real-world experiences (Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2013). Teacher training is more meaningful when teachers are engaged in professional learning opportunities that assists them in understanding and applying new curricular approaches and makes clear connections to daily practice, integrating problems, questions, and solutions (Lee, Baik & Charlesworth, 2006).

However, the research does show there are inconsistencies with the way teachers define developmentally appropriate practices based on their understanding and beliefs, which affects the level of implementation across classrooms. Teachers demonstrate varied understandings of play and face discrepancies between theories and front-line practices (Pui-Wah & Stimpson, 2004).

The research emphasized the importance of play in kindergarten classrooms, categorizing it as an integral part of children’s growth and development which enhances physical and mental health (Jachyra & Fusco, 2016). Although the research denotes the benefits of play to children’s overall development and academic success, kindergarten teachers feel pressure to conform to inappropriate methods of teaching, in an effort to meet excessive academic expectations set forth by policy makers for higher grades. Pressures include expectations to perform on inappropriate high-stakes tests. The use of an appropriate kindergarten entry assessments will provide data to measure children’s development using a comprehensive observation-based tool, and lends itself to promote flexible learning environments for all children which support active experiential learning.

The research supports the significance of teachers’ perceptions and beliefs about play to its implementation in the classroom. The research also highlights the need for a clear understanding
of DAP and play-based learning among teachers as well as ways to integrate play into kindergarten curricula. This study examined the implementation of play in NJ KEA teachers’ classrooms, to better understand how teachers’ perspectives and experiences in kindergarten classrooms influence the implementation of play-based learning.
Chapter 3: Research Design

This study explored how teachers’ perspectives and experiences in kindergarten classrooms influence the implementation of play-based learning. A play-based approach to learning supports the overall development of brain, cognitive, linguistic, physical and social-emotional well-being in young children (Wood, 2014). In this study, a qualitative approach was employed to answer the research questions. Qualitative case study is an approach to research that facilitates exploration of a phenomenon within its context, using multiple data sources to ensure the phenomenon is not being examined using only one lens (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Qualitative research studies a topic of interest in its natural settings, and sets out to interpret phenomena through the meanings people bring them (Creswell, 2013). Methods of data collection in qualitative research include interviews, observations, and documents (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research draws from constructivism, considering the interactions between the investigator and the object of the investigation, and supports collaboration among learners to co-construct findings from their interpretations and dialogue regarding the topic of study (Ponterotto, 2005).

In this study, the research questions were designed to illuminate the experiences of participants who participated in a kindergarten seminar (KS) as part of the Kindergarten Entry Assessment initiative (KEA). Teachers who participated in the kindergarten seminar were trained on the importance of play as well as how to implement a play-based approach to learning in kindergarten. Understanding teachers’ perspectives and experience with play-based learning were uncovered through structured dialogue with kindergarten teachers who had participated in the KEA initiative. Kindergarten programs now implement highly prescriptive curricula and standardized assessment practices that take away from learning through play and exploration.
(Miller & Almon, 2009). In order to inform sustainable, play-based approaches to learning in kindergarten classrooms, it is critical to explore teachers’ perspectives and experiences of play-based learning.

The primary research question was developed to examine the participants overall beliefs and experiences of play-based learning in kindergarten, and the secondary question was developed to address academic expectations teachers are faced with achieving.

**Research Approach**

This study employed a qualitative, intrinsic case study to explore kindergarten teachers’ perspectives and experiences of play-based learning. The aim of qualitative research is to help one understand a phenomenon using a naturalistic approach (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research starts with an assumption and uses a theoretical framework to inform the study of research problems that address individuals or groups that attribute to a social or human problem (Creswell, 2013). In a qualitative study, the researcher collects data in a natural setting where the participants are experiencing the problem being studied, and establishes common patterns or themes in the data analysis (Creswell, 2013).

Using an intrinsic case study research approach provided an appropriate lens for capturing the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers who received kindergarten seminar training (KS) through the KEA initiative. The choice for using intrinsic case study stemmed from the researcher’s initial involvement in leading the KEA initiative in the district. After leaving Woodsdale School district to assume other career opportunities, the researcher was interested in knowing if a play-based approach to learning had been sustained by the initial KS participants. As an early childhood administrator, the researcher had a vested interest in developmentally appropriate assessment and instructional practices implemented in kindergarten
classrooms, to ensure the overall development and well-being of young children. The selected research approach is supported by Stake (1995) who stated, researchers choose to employ intrinsic case study to learn about a particular case that they are curious about. The researcher is not interested in learning about a general problem or other case studies, they conduct the study to learn about a specific case they have a direct interest in (Stake, 1995). The researcher has a vested interested in a particular pre-selected case and the aim is to understand the case in the context of its setting (Stake, 1995). Using a case study approach engaged the KS teachers in dialog that uncovered their perceptions of play drawn from their lived experiences with implementation.

**Research Tradition**

Case study research is one of several forms of social science research (Yin, 2014). It entails the examination of a case within a real-life contemporary setting (Creswell, 2013). Case study is intended to focus on a particular issue, feature, or unit of analysis (Noor, 2008). Case study is used to answer questions such as how and why as well as uncover contextual conditions that are relevant to the phenomenon under study (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

The work of both Robert Yin and Robert Stake, has generally been cited by researchers in support of the methodology used in case study (Boblin, Ireland, Kirkpatrick & Robertson, 2013). Merriam is also marked as a key seminal author of case study research and is closely matched to Stake. Both Stake and Merriam provide key approaches that guide case study methodology, basing their approach to case study on a constructivist paradigm, claiming that truth is relative and is dependent on one’s perspective (Yazan, 2015). Constructivism supports the idea that one learns from their interactions between their lived experiences in relationship to their ideas and beliefs. Yin leans toward a positivistic approach and suggests there are three
different types of case study research; exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory (Noor, 2008). Stake identifies case study as intrinsic, instrumental, or collective (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Stake described case study research as not a methodology, but as a choice of what is to be studied. Merriam (1998) suggests the research leads to knowing more about phenomenon. The purpose is to acquire more knowledge about a topic than what a researcher started with. The case, activity, or the event under investigation are seen as unique as well as common, and requires an understanding of other cases, activities, events and their uniqueness (Stake, 1995). Uniqueness in the case, the activity, the event is seen by vested people close to the phenomenon under investigation as unprecedented and important, and stands out through a feeling of uniqueness as they uncover narratives, vignettes and experiential accounts (Stake, 1995; Van Maanan, 1988). Researchers collect data in the form of observation or conduct interviews to understand what others have experienced in order to understand a case and to uncover critical information that is particular to a case (Stake, 1995).

For the purpose of this study and the researchers vested interest in the KEA initiative, a Stakian approach to case study was employed. A qualitative intrinsic case study allowed the researcher to study the implementation of play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms through the lens of the KS teachers lived experiences. Stake’s (1995) approach to case study allowed the researcher to study the participants within the context of the KEA initiative and the current kindergarten program, in order to understand the current implementation of play-based learning in their classrooms. For the intent and purpose of enacting real change related to play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms, I wanted to capture kindergarten teachers lived experiences without my own personal interpretations getting in the way. Employing a Stakian approach to case study entailed observing and collecting data in a natural setting, allowing me to
understand what was unique and specific to the case. It allowed me to examine the phenomenon on the premise that one learns from their interactions between their lived experiences in relationship to their ideas and beliefs. This was important to my study since I am interested in understanding the role of teacher beliefs and understanding of play-based learning to its actual implementation.

**Participants**

The research study was conducted in a New Jersey urban school district. The name of the district, Woodsdale Public School District, school, Sunny Hills School, and participants were changed to ensure confidentiality. Two kindergarten teachers volunteered to participate in the study as well as two master teacher coaches and two school administrators. The participants were chosen based on their involvement with the KEA initiative and kindergarten seminar training. The researcher used semi-structured interviews that were audio recorded, to collect data. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the main method of data collection due to the researcher’s interest in uncovering the participants perceptions of and experiences with play-based learning. The researcher conducted observations to collect data to identify how play was being implemented in their current kindergarten classrooms, as well as collected and analyzed coaching notes between kindergarten teachers and master teachers assigned to the KEA initiative.

Woodsdale Public Schools is a large urban school district, implementing cutting edge early childhood programs in preschool and kindergarten. Woodsdale is a diverse district that services approximately 30,000 students in grades preschool through twelfth grade. The student population is comprised of students representing Hispanic, African American, Caucasian, Middle Eastern or Asian descent with a total of 40 languages spoken. Approximately 3,300 students
receive special education services and approximately 3,500 students are English Language learners, receiving bilingual/ESL services. Approximately 80% of their population receives free and reduced breakfast and lunch.

The teachers and administrators who volunteered to participate in the study worked at Sunny Hills School. It is one of the oldest schools built in Woodsdale School district, servicing students from preschool through eighth grade. The kindergarten teachers at Sunny Hills School were a part of the original group of teachers chosen to participate in the KEA initiative. To date, the kindergarten teachers at Sunny Hills School are the only teachers from the original KEA group who continued to implement the KEA initiative well after the initial trainings.

Typical of case study research, one case is studied in order to understand it in depth (Stake, 1995). The study of this case, examining the original KS participants, will allow for in-depth insights into the problem, and the participants will be receptive to the inquiry due to their commitment to the KEA initiative. The criterion for the selection of the participants was dependent upon their involvement with KEA and kindergarten seminar as well as the participants ability to sustain the initiative. The kindergarten seminar teachers (KS) in this study were well underway with the implementation of the KEA initiative. This study provided an opportunity to explore play-based learning in two of the original kindergarten seminar teachers classrooms, to see if instructional and assessment practices have been sustained. Limitations to be considered is the small sample size. Although the number of teachers is limited, their participation and commitment to the KEA initiative led the researcher to greater understandings, assertions, and possibly remodel generalizations (Stake, 1995).
**Recruitment and Access**

Recruitment of participants’ required several steps for gaining approval to conduct the research study. The school district has a research approval process that allows access to the research site and collection of data. Permission to conduct the study needed to be sought from a human subjects review board, to review the study’s potential harmful impact on and risk to the participants (Creswell, 2013). The IRB process was conducted through Northeastern University.

Once the study was approved by IRB and the school district, the researcher was able to recruit participants. The two classroom teachers, two school administrators, and two master teacher coaches were provided a letter in email form, asking them to consent to participate in the research study. The letter to participants included the purpose and process of the study as well as the participants’ right to voluntarily withdraw from the study. The letter informed the participants they would receive a twenty-dollar gift card to Barnes and Noble as a benefit for participating in the study. All interviews and survey data were kept confidential and the subjects’ names were changed, to ensure the protection of the participants.

**Data Collection**

In qualitative case study research, the data collection may include, but not limited to, data sources such as documentation, archival records, interviews, physical artifacts, direct observations and participant-observation (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Multiple sources of data, rich in real-life situations, is a distinguishing characteristic of case study methodology (Boblin et al, 2013; Stake, 1995). A key idea to keep in mind when thinking about data collection, is to determine what type of data will provide you with substantial, rich information to inform your research. Stake suggests the use of triangulation; using multiple data sources to gain a holistic
understanding of the phenomenon being researched such as observation, interview and document review (Boblin et al, 2013).

The data collection for this intrinsic case study included semi-structured in-depth interviews, observations, and coaching notes. The researcher conducted face to face interviews with two kindergarten teachers, two master teachers and two administrator participants. Each interview lasted approximately thirty to forty minutes based on probing questions that emerge as a result of the participant’s responses to specific questions. The purpose of the interviews was for the researcher to gain insights into the participants’ perceptions of and experience with play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms. The interviews were held in a private office in the school that was mutually agreed upon by both the researcher and the participant.

Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed. During the interview process the researcher recorded handwritten notes to mark pauses and expressions of the participant as a way to inform and support the data. The interview questions for the administrators and coaches were slightly different from the teacher participants’, focusing on testing and accountability expectations specific to their position. The second data point included in this study entailed classroom observations conducted by the researcher in the Exploratorium, which was created by the kindergarten teachers and administrators. The observation was conducted for 40 minutes during a set Exploratorium time, to observe how play was being implemented throughout the school day. The researcher included data such as coaching session notes with KS teachers specific to the KEA initiative. The notes came from coaching sessions logged by the KS master teacher coaches, in the form of individual and grade level coaching sessions. Master teacher coaches are required to log their coaching sessions with all teachers, which requires detailed topics of discussion and next steps for coaching and implementation.
Data Analysis

Data analysis is a series of choices one makes about how the researcher will interact with the data (Ravitch & Riggan, 2012). Case study analysis consists of creating a detailed description of the case as well as its setting (Creswell, 2013). In qualitative studies, data collection and analysis occur simultaneously (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Stake defines analysis as a “matter of giving meaning to first impressions as well as to final compilations,” using the researcher’s impressions as the main source of making sense of the data (Yazan, 2015).

Related to the analysis of this intrinsic case study research, the researcher transcribed audio recorded interviews as a first step, and then code the data. After a careful review of the transcriptions and notes taken during the interviews to ensure accuracy, the researcher began the process of journaling of recurring thoughts and statements that presented as interesting. The researcher used In Vivo coding to analyze the interview data. In Vivo coding uses words or short phrases from the participants own language from the data collection as codes (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014). In Vivo coding will be most valuable, as the researcher is seeking to uncover insights from teachers lived experiences and their beliefs about play-based learning in kindergarten. The researcher began the coding process by reading each line of the transcripts, to identifying key words or phrases from the participants’ responses that were used repeatedly or revealed language specific to the culture of kindergarten teachers. Each highlighted section was assigned a word or phrase from the participants' own language as a code. In Vivo coding uses the direct language of the participant rather than researcher –produced words or phrases to ground the analysis in the participant’s perspectives (Saldaña, 2016).

After completing the first cycle coding process, the researcher identified a pattern coding process as a second cycle method. The first step was to identify the recurring words or phrases
that emerged in the first coding cycle. The researcher assigned colors to various codes as a way to cluster similar thoughts and language together. While reading through the first cycle of coding, the researcher highlighted similar language and thoughts together using color codes. The color-coding method provided the researcher with a quick visual for how to chunk the data together to create themes. The researcher engaged in a cross-checking of the codes with the interview questions the data was assigned to, as well as reading the entire response of the participant, to ensure the codes were identified in the appropriate context. The researcher also captured and considered pauses and expressions of the participants as a way to inform and support the data. The researcher conducted all coding manually.

**Trustworthiness**

To ensure validity and trustworthiness in this intrinsic case study, the researcher employed protocols for accuracy. In an effort to attain accuracy, researchers need discipline and protocols which do not depend on mere intuition and good intention to “get it right” (Stake, 1995, p. 107). Utilizing protocols to ensure accuracy and trustworthiness validate the findings and gain the trust of the readers. The researcher utilized several protocols for accuracy such as triangulation, member checking, rich thick description, as well as an external audit.

Triangulation entails a review of all data points to establish true meaning. In case study research, one may assume the meaning of an observation is one thing, but through the review of additional data points and observations, it allows for the researcher to revise interpretations (Stake, 1995). Through the process of triangulation, the researcher uses corroborating evidence from various resources to provide insights on a theme, providing validity to their findings (Creswell, 2013). The triangulation process in this study entailed the triangulation of interview data, observation data, and master teacher coaching notes.
Member checking is the process of soliciting the participants views of the findings (Creswell, 2013). The researcher included participants in the review of the findings to ensure their thoughts are represented accurately. The participants were provided a summarized paragraph of their responses to the interview questions. The participants were able to provide additional information to the researcher to clarify ideas or make additional comments. Member checking will ensure the researcher is accurately representing the participants responses and capturing a true sense of the phenomena.

The use of rich, thick description provided the reader with specific details when describing the case or writing about themes (Creswell, 2013). Rich, thick description allows the reader to construct meaning connected to the case and their own understandings or experiences related to the case. The researcher used the participants’ own words and written notes to provide rich, thick descriptive language to represent the participants’ ideas in each theme. The researcher solicited the assistance from an outside auditor to ensure the research study is accurate. The outside auditor was an early childhood expert and had intimate knowledge of the New Jersey Kindergarten Assessment initiative. The auditor reviewed the information in the study pertaining to the NJKEA initiative and play-based learning to ensure it was communicated accurately. The outside auditor examined language used to describe the NJKEA initiative against its original intent. An auditor from the district who oversees the master teacher coaches reviewed the documentation collected from coaching sessions and kindergarten seminars to authenticate the implementation of the initiative in the chosen two KEA classrooms.

Potential threats to validity can arise when the researcher shares personal experiences connected to the phenomenon such as the participants or site being studied (Creswell, 2013). Internal validity is achieved by having procedures in place that minimize or eliminate the effects
of potential threats to the legitimacy of outcomes in the study (Albright & Malloy, 2000). It addresses the ability to dismiss alternative explanations for an outcome (Woodman, 2014). There are limited risks of internal validity in this intrinsic case study research. The researcher is not employed with the Woodsdale Public School district and does not have any influence over the KEA initiative on the district or state level. The teacher participants in the research study participated in the KEA initiative and have received kindergarten seminar training. In addition to the kindergarten seminar training, the teacher participants received support from the master teacher coaches. This ensures the participants have a clear understanding of the role of play-based learning in kindergarten. The participants’ involvement in the KEA initiative is voluntary. The sharing of the participants thoughts, beliefs, and experiences are more likely to be uninhibited, due to the implementation of play-based learning being free choice, and not a requirement of the district or their administrators. A challenge presented in this study is, not all of the original KEA teachers are currently employed at the Sunny Hill School, making the teacher participant size smaller than initially expected.

Although the researcher has extensive knowledge of and experiences with early childhood best practices, there is not a personal or professional connection to the participants or their implementation of play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms.

**Limitations**

A limitation during the data collection process, was gaining access to all of the original KEA participants at the site being studied. Due to internal district teacher transfers as well as retirements and resignations, not all of the identified original group of kindergarten seminar teachers were teaching or employed in the district or at Sunny Hill School, during the time of the data collection.
Conclusion

The current trend being imposed on children in kindergarten classrooms towards standardized curriculum and test-based content has led to an increase of direct instruction and less time for children to play and explore (Wood, 2014). The current problem in kindergarten has led the researcher to pose the question: How do teachers’ perspectives and experiences influence the implementation of play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms? A second question was posed to explore the factor of accountability, in relationship to the current trend in kindergarten classrooms: How do kindergarten teachers believe testing and accountability expectations have influenced their attitudes towards the implementation of play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms? In order to answer these questions, the researcher employed a qualitative, intrinsic case study which allowed the researcher to study the case within a real-life setting (Yin, 2009; Creswell, 2013). The participants in the study participated in the NJKEA initiative and received kindergarten seminar training. A key component of the kindergarten seminar training focuses on a play-based approach to learning. The data in this study was gathered from conducting semi-structured interviews, observations, and reviewing coaching documents. Although the researcher led the initial NJKEA initiative and co-facilitated the kindergarten seminar trainings, she is no longer employed by the district being studied and does not have a personal or professional connection to the participants or the site.
Chapter 4: Presentation of Findings

The goal of reporting case study research is to convert a complex phenomenon into a format that will be easily understood by the reader (Baxter & Jack, 2008). It entails the ability to describe the study in a manner in which the reader feels as if they had been an active participant in the research, allowing them to determine what aspect of the findings apply to their own situation (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Stake suggested there are multiple perspectives that need to be represented as well as the need to minimize the misrepresentation and misunderstanding of the findings, through the use of protocols, procedures and member checking (Yazan, 2015). Yin (2002) states that a quality case study is described as one that is significant, considers multiple perspectives, displays evidence and has the ability to grasp the interest of the reader. In a qualitative study, it is essential to provide the reader with a detailed picture to show the authors conclusion “makes sense” (Yazan, 2015; Merriam, 1998).

The aim of this study was to explore how teachers’ perspectives and experiences in kindergarten classrooms influence the implementation of play-based learning. This study employed a qualitative, intrinsic case study to capture the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers who received kindergarten seminar training (KS) through the Kindergarten Entry Assessment initiative (KEA). The researcher was interested in exploring whether or not play-based practices had been sustained in kindergarten seminar teachers (KS) classrooms, after the initial training and ongoing coaching support. The implementation of play-based learning and developmentally appropriate practices in kindergarten are critical to young children’s academic success and healthy development (Jachyra & Fusco, 2014). The study examined participants perspectives and experiences with the implementation of play-based learning in kindergarten seminar teacher’s (KS) classrooms, in order to answer the following research questions:
Primary: How do teachers’ perspectives and experiences influence the implementation of play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms? Secondary: How do kindergarten teachers believe testing and accountability expectations have influenced their attitudes towards the implementation of play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms?

The remainder of this chapter will consist of three major sections. The first section will discuss the creation of the Exploratorium and provide a description of the observations conducted with kindergarten seminar teachers’ (KS) classrooms. The second section will provide a description of the participants to gain insights on their professional training and experiences with the KEA initiative. The participant descriptions will serve as additional information when considering their perceptions of play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms. The last section will consist of themes that emerged from the participant interviews. The themes will reflect common perceptions and understandings of play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms among the participants.

Exploratorium

The Exploratorium is an identified play environment in the Sunny Hill School. Play centers are set up throughout the classroom to support kindergarten children's active engagement in learning centers with their peers where they were observed building, exploring and talking. The Exploratorium is bright, inviting and filled with various learning materials, children explore and interact with. Teachers circulate around the classroom to assist children with their work and engage them in meaningful conversations that extend critical thinking and facilitate deeper understanding of content. It’s a place where children have the opportunity to practice critical social skills, learn to collaborate, problem solve, share, and self-regulate. Appendix 1 represents pictures of play experiences the kindergarten children were engaged in during the observation.
Participants

Six participants were interviewed, two kindergarten teachers, two master teachers and two administrators. All six participants were involved in the initial Kindergarten Seminar training. Copies of the master teacher’s coaching logs were collected as additional artifacts for review. Master teacher coaches are required to keep daily logs of their coaching sessions with teachers and any other tasks, professional development, and supports provided throughout the day. Coaching logs indicate specific details regarding interactions with teachers, as well as next steps to be taken and issues that need attention to ensure program quality. When reviewing the data, master teacher coaching logs provided insight into the type of support and training that was provided to kindergarten teachers. All of the participants presented common views and understandings of play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms, despite their varying levels of participation in the Kindergarten Seminar trainings and Kindergarten Entry Assessment initiative.

The next section of this chapter will provide a brief description of each participant. Table 1 indicates demographic background information pertaining to the participants interviewed for the study. In an effort to maintain confidentiality, the participants will be referred to as teacher 1, teacher 2, master teacher 1, master teacher 2, administrator 1, administrator 2.
Table 1

Demographic Information of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Highest Degree Earned</th>
<th>Years in Education</th>
<th>Years in District</th>
<th>Years of Experience with Kindergarten</th>
<th>Formal early childhood training</th>
<th>Play-based learning training</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Admin. 1</td>
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<td>27</td>
<td>13</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admin. 2</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participant Profiles

**Teacher 1.** Teacher 1 is in her mid-thirties and has been teaching for eight years. She has been in the district since 2011 and taught kindergarten for six years. Teacher 1 was an original participant in the KEA Kindergarten Seminar training and received coaching from the master teachers. During the interview, Teacher 1 was eager to share her insights on play-based learning. Her overall attitude was positive when discussing the KEA initiative and supported the need to shift instructional practices in kindergarten. Teacher 1 provided rich descriptions of play experiences that incorporated academic learning and gave detailed examples of how she facilitated learning in the Exploratorium using a play-based approach. Teacher 1 expressed frustration with having to teach scripted programs throughout the day, that did not support what she had learned during the Kindergarten Seminar training.

**Teacher 2.** Teacher 2 is in her late-thirties and has been teaching for seventeen years. Teacher 2 has been in the district for fourteen years and taught kindergarten for twelve years. Over the years, Teacher 2 has attended various early childhood workshops and was a participant in the KEA Kindergarten Seminar training, and received coaching from the master teachers. Teacher 2 was extremely pleasant and smiled often when discussing her experience in kindergarten. She described play experiences as being positive and providing valuable time to learn about children’s individual interest. Teacher 2 valued the kindergarten seminar training and support from master teachers. She exhibited knowledge of how to integrate content learning through play using examples of classroom practices she has used with her students. She was visibly frustrated with the lack of flexibility the current kindergarten curriculum reflected.

**Master Teacher 1.** Master Teacher 1 is in her late forties and has been in education for twenty-five years. She has been in the district for twenty years where she taught kindergarten for
eighteen years. Prior to working in the district, she was a preschool teacher. After teaching kindergarten for eighteen years, she transitioned to the districts Department of Early Childhood Education, where she was appointed to the position of master teacher. As a master teacher, she developed and presented workshop trainings during the second year of the kindergarten seminar and provided follow-up support and coaching to teachers in the KEA Kindergarten Seminar cohort. Master teacher 1 provided detailed descriptions of the frustrations KS teachers felt while trying to implement play in their classrooms due to the required kindergarten programs. She was an advocate for play in kindergarten classrooms and felt the current kindergarten standards could be taught and assessed through a play-based approach.

**Master Teacher 2.** Master Teacher 2 has been in the district for seventeen years. Her entire teaching career has been in the district. Master teacher 2 was a preschool teacher for eight years. After teaching preschool, she transitioned to the districts Department of Early Childhood Education, where she has been working as a master teacher and was recently promoted to supervisor. Master teacher 2 provided training, follow-up support and coaching to teachers in the KEA cohort. During the interview, she demonstrated extensive knowledge of early childhood best practices by describing specific characteristics of play-based learning and the critical part the environment has on creating meaningful play experiences for children. Her earnest responses along with non-verbal cues demonstrated a serious passion for shifting kindergarten practices towards a play-based learning approach.

**Administrator 1.** Administrator 1 has been in the district for twenty-seven years. Her entire career was in the district where she began her educational journey as a kindergarten aide. Additional experience in kindergarten has been overseeing the program for thirteen years as the building administrator. Administrator 1 was extremely helpful in providing detailed information
about the kindergarten program related to new initiatives she has implemented despite district mandates for kindergarten. The light-hearted administrator did not hesitate to share her administrative experience when it came to making building and procedural changes to support play in kindergarten.

**Administrator 2.** Administrator 2 has been in the district for twelve years. She has worked with kindergarten teachers for six years, as an administrator in the school. Administrator 2 expressed she has not experienced any formal early childhood training however, she attended coaching sessions and meetings with master teacher coaches and kindergarten teachers regarding the KEA initiative to support their needs when implementing play. Administrator 2 assisted kindergarten teachers with creating the Exploratorium, as a way to provide children with play-based experiences. During the interview, she exhibited a solid understanding of early childhood best practices through her detailed examples of play, linking them to developmental and academic skills play support. Through her description of interactions with the kindergarten teachers, administrator 2 was clearly visible and genuinely interested in what teachers had to say.

**Themes Overview**

When identifying themes, I reflected back to the primary and secondary research questions to capture participants perceptions based on their experiences, to gain accurate insights aligned to each question. When considering the primary research question: How do teachers’ perspectives and experiences influence the implementation of play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms, three main themes emerged: (1) champions for play-based learning and sub-themes - developmentally appropriate practices and socialization, (2) adequate support, (3) curriculum challenges and sub-theme-lack of autonomy. When considering the secondary research question: How do kindergarten teachers believe testing and accountability expectations have influenced
their attitudes towards the implementation of play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms, one major theme emerged: push down effect.

The common themes that emerged were all referenced frequently by the participants and related to multiple interview question responses. The participants presented strong attitudes towards the first identified theme, champions of play. Play was considered to be the preferred and most developmentally appropriate method of teaching and learning in kindergarten classrooms. Play was thought to provide children with opportunities to engage in real-life experiences they could make sense of, through exploration and scaffolding by the teacher. Play was also identified as a tool to teach critical social skills. Through play, children would be able to practice communication and self-regulation through problem solving. In order to develop and maintain play-based environments that teachers championed, various support systems would need to be in place. Adequate support emerged as the second theme. The teacher participants held varying views regarding their individual needs related to the support they received. Adequate support related to training and the classroom environment were key factors in kindergarten teachers’ ability to create and sustain effective play-based practices in their classrooms. Curriculum challenges emerged as the third theme. All of the participants described their dismay with having to teach a prescribed, scripted curricula that did not allow time for play experiences. Participants described the current curriculum reflective of cookie-cutter programs that supported paper-pencil methods of teaching. All of the participants referenced a lack of autonomy they each felt when it came to employing instructional practices that were appropriate for kindergarten children. Current curriculum program choices in kindergarten were contributed to a need to teach more academic content due to low standardized test scores in grades three through eight. Push down effect emerged as the last theme. Academic expectations that were
once considered to be first grade skills are now expected to be mastered in kindergarten. Participants felt the change in kindergarten expectations were attributed to the growing need to achieve rigorous academic benchmarks in grades three through eight. In order to accomplish this, academic content has been pushed down from first grade into kindergarten, shifting programming to more didactic, teacher directed practices.

**Theme 1- Champions for Play-Based Learning**

Play was viewed by the participants at the research site, as having a substantial role in the development of the whole child. They were all champions for play-based learning, which emerged as a compelling theme that was identified throughout the data. Each participant spoke with great passion about the positive impact play has on kindergarten children. The participants felt play was a critical instructional approach to learning in kindergarten and was the most effective way for children to acquire and internalize information, and construct new knowledge from those acquired skills and concepts. While free play was viewed as important for nurturing creativity and social emotional development, guided play was viewed by the participants as a primary approach to address academic learning. Free play is identified as a play pedagogy that provides substantial opportunities for children to choose their own learning through play (Pyle, Poliszczuk & Danniels, 2018). Guided play is identified as often based on specific and predetermined curricular learning where the teacher can integrate intentional and purposeful learning within children's play (Pyle, Poliszczuk & Danniels, 2018). The participants viewed play as a way to engage children in fun activities that fostered creativity and exploration while learning important kindergarten academic content. Administrator 2 captured this when she stated, “So when I hear play-based learning I think of student engagement, collaboration, kids playing but at the same time they’re learning, so playing I think equals learning.”
experiences cultivate self-directed learners who enjoy social interactions among their peers and with adults. Through play, critical developmental and academic skills are intertwined in a manner that allows children to develop complex understandings about real-world situations, making learning fun and less stressful for our youngest learners. Master teacher 1 highlighted the importance of play to children’s learning when stating, “You can pretty much get them to do anything if they’re playing because they don’t even realize they are learning. So, I think it’s the ideal way of teaching children because that’s what makes them happiest.” Children enjoy play experiences because it feels natural and it’s fun. The teacher participants often discussed their frustration with having to use programs that encouraged paper-pencil activities, and did not feel this was an effective approach to teaching academic content to kindergarten children. Children’s interest and engagement levels in academic learning increased when provided play opportunities. Teacher 2 stated, “But instead of pencil and paper-based, which is what we do a lot of in kindergarten, we’re using play. And the kids love it. They actually enjoy it.” The participants felt teaching content through play experiences assisted in making the learning more meaningful because the children viewed it as fun and could make connections to what they were being taught.

All of the participants referenced the need for kindergarten children to explore through play experiences and learn from objects and materials in their environment, to promote deeper understandings about concepts and skills being presented. Establishing a variety of materials connected to specific academic learning in the classroom environment is an essential component to play-based learning. Children interact with purposeful materials during center activities, connected to academic learning. Teacher 1 stated, “To me it’s when we’re allowing the children to explore but learn as they explore. Give them something in their hands, a manipulative, like in
the block area where they can build a tower and I can ask how many blocks they are using and talk about shapes.” The participants referenced the value of using materials in the environment to guide and scaffold learning through questioning techniques. While interacting with materials in the environment, the teacher can embed questioning and facilitate conversations that extend children's learning and promote deeper understandings about the academic learning they are engaged in. An environment rich with various materials to support important learning was an essential factor to play-based learning, that was referenced by all of the participants. Master teacher 2 captured the importance of the environment when she stated, “I think of a lot of materials. I think of a variety of materials in different content areas like literacy and math, some science materials, manipulatives.” Teacher 2 shared, “They have different areas. Everything is labeled. The materials are accessible to children.” Accessibility of materials was viewed as a key element to ensuring children have ample opportunities to engage with materials through play experiences that promote deeper understandings of concepts and skills in various ways. The participants felt, providing children with adequate materials that support kindergarten skills was essential to facilitating meaningful play experiences in kindergarten. Teacher 1 discussed the importance of providing children with the tools they need to be successful in a play-based environment, “It’s pretty simple. Give them the tools they need, putting things in their environment that will promote and encourage and invite them to learn particular skills at different stages of their development.” Through appropriate and adequate materials in a kindergarten classroom environments, play and academic learning take place at the same time.

The benefits of play are supportive of children's learning and overall development within different play contexts, in an appropriate learning environment. The participants’ perception of play-based learning supported a developmentally appropriate approach to learning, which
emerged as a subtheme to champions of play. Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP) emerged as a set of behaviors that were deemed appropriate for where kindergarten children are situated on a developmental spectrum. The participants often referenced instructional settings and materials that should be used with kindergarten students that were thought to be developmentally appropriate and support the way young children learn. Teacher 1 stated, “I think it’s for what their age is and what has been studied, what they are capable of doing.” Instructional practices such as paper-pencil methods and teacher directed instruction were deemed as inappropriate methods of teaching kindergarten children. Participants felt that children learn best from engaging in activities that incorporated materials that are appropriate for their age and ability level. Through the use of appropriate materials and teacher support, children are able to construct new learning. Master teacher 2 discussed using materials and instructional practices that meet children at their level and scaffolding learning through those materials, to advance children’s understanding of concepts and skills on a learning progression. Master teacher 2 stated, “I think age is important. It should challenge them but it can’t challenge them too much in a sense that it wouldn’t be appropriate for their age. I think age and ability.” During the interviews, the participants often mentioned DAP when discussing play-based experiences for children in the classroom. It was common to hear the two terms used in conjunction with one another. Participants mentioned several times, the need to meet students where they are academically and developmentally through the use of materials purposely planned throughout the environment, to allow children to have a voice, make choices and be creative. Administrator 1 captured this when she stated, “It’s allowing children to make choices, to have a voice of their own and allowing teachers to meet the students where they are as opposed to the students meeting the teacher’s needs.” A play-based approach considers the
importance of the environment to children's learning and overall development. Play experiences that mimic real world applications coupled with appropriate materials and activities to teach and enhance academic learning, supports developmentally appropriate experiences for kindergarten children.

While championing play, participants often referenced the positive impact play-based learning had on creating positive social interactions among children in their classrooms. Throughout the interviews, the concept of socialization and positive interactions among children related to play-based learning dominated the conversation. In all of the participant’s responses, play-based learning was connected to socialization and healthy interactions among children which supported collaboration, problem solving, and creativity. Administrator 1 stated, “I believe that the social emotional piece tied into play, in allowing them to be creative and interact with one another.” Play based-learning supports the development of language and communicating needs effectively. Through play experiences, children learn how to interact with one another appropriately, using their words to express their thoughts and needs appropriately. Teacher 1 expressed her beliefs about the positive impact play had on her students, “I think play-based learning has a lot of emotional and social aspects to it where they are socializing and learning how to share, how to communicate using their words which is big in kindergarten. Using your words is big, so it does promote positive interactions among the children.” The participants felt play-based learning promoted child-initiated experiences that assisted with developing the skill of self-regulation. Children were able to practice self-regulation by engaging in activities that require them to take turns, share materials, collaborate with one another and create solutions to problems that considered ideas other than their own. Master teacher 1 felt play-based learning helped children learn how to interact with
other children appropriately, “So I think it helps then grow as individuals because again they’ll have their choices and they’ll learn to interact with other personalities and other children in positive ways.” Administrator 2 referenced play as something kindergarten children needed to engage in as a way to inquire about the world around them and use critical thinking skills to problem solve. While observing in the Exploratorium, children were in small groups of two to four children working on tasks. I was able to hear them talking about the materials they were using and planning how to build structures and solve problems. Two little girls were playing with magnatiles, trying to decide which magnatile shape would best fit the castle they were building. They engaged in a conversation about the size and shape of the window that would suit their structure and then tried it out. Children were actively engaged with one another in a positive manner during the observation. All of the participants felt play-based learning supported the development of social emotional skills, allowing children to collaborate and work together to solve problems, which is critical to learning.

**Theme 2- Adequate Support**

The second theme addressed the support KS teachers were provided to assist them with implementing play in their classrooms. It was evident throughout the interviews, teachers’ ability to implement a play-based approach to learning depended on having adequate support from their administrators and staff involved in the KEA initiative. Support emerged in different forms such as administrators creating opportunities during the course of the week for play experiences, kindergarten seminar trainings, embedded coaching from master teachers, and materials and supplies. When the KEA initiative first began, the intended training for KS teachers was a five-session training that would take place during the course of one year. To ensure the initiative was successful and kindergarten teachers receive adequate support to
implement play in their classrooms as well as the observation-based kindergarten entry assessment (KEA), the district decided to provide a second year of follow-up training and site-based support from master teachers. School-based administrative support was essential to the success of the initiative since they oversee the daily operations of the kindergarten programs in their school buildings.

The two administrator participants expressed their belief in providing children with play experiences to meet their learning needs and achieve academic and developmental success. Due to this belief, they were able to make adaptations to the kindergarten schedules to allow time for play-based learning. Administrator 1 expressed this when stating, “Changing the schedule allowed me to have that academic choice period, allowing students to have that flexibility, again for creativity and positive learning experiences.” Academic choice time is a time where play-based learning takes place. Children are able to choose the center they want to go to such as, dramatic play, blocks, math, literacy/library, science/discovery and technology. Students engage in play experiences connected to the curriculum, that are facilitated by the teacher and instructional classroom aide. Administrator 1 felt the training she received during the Kindergarten Seminar assisted her in understanding early childhood best practices which ultimately enhanced her understanding of how to better support her teachers. Administrator 1 stated, “I’ve learned through KEA, about early childhood best practices, and that has helped me enhance my classes.” Administrator 1 felt the kindergarten seminar trainings provided her with an early childhood lens to understand how to make necessary changes to her kindergarten program that would make learning more meaningful in kindergarten classrooms. Administrator 2 also discussed the schedule changes made in kindergarten as well as the creation of the Exploratorium, to ensure students were able to have time for play experiences. Administrator 2
felt teachers should be creative and provided the opportunity to try different instructional approaches. She stated, “I think play-based learning is important. That’s all creativity and you know, as an administration here in the building, we allow our teachers to kind of do that and say you know what, I want to try this. Go ahead, do it!” It should be noted, although administrative staff was invited to all of the KS trainings, only a handful of school-based and district-wide administrators participated.

Teacher participants felt the kindergarten seminar trainings and coaching sessions from master teacher coaches were beneficial in developing a stronger conceptual understanding of how to implement play in their classrooms. The districts early childhood department felt KS teachers should have a second year of training along with follow up with coaching support from master teachers. The master teacher logs indicated multiple coaching sessions with KEA kindergarten seminar teachers, where support was provided on the KEA performance-based assessment system used to capture learning through play experiences. The logs also noted, after the first year of KS training in 2013-2014, kindergarten teachers were implementing a play, center-based learning approach in their classrooms. Master teachers provided a second year of KEA Kindergarten Seminar training and technical follow-up support on the performance-based assessment system in 2014-2015. Key components of the kindergarten seminar training focused on providing teachers with clear connections on how to teach critical kindergarten concepts and skills through play. Meaningful teacher-child interactions and the classroom environment were two areas of professional development master teachers addressed during the second year of KS training. Teacher 2 was satisfied with the training she received and expressed how it enhanced her understanding of play. Researcher notes indicated kindergarten teachers felt they were provided with adequate training on play-based learning and enjoyed the in-depth KEA
Kindergarten Seminar training they received. Teacher 2 stated, “We went to the NJ KEA and we learned a lot in training about how to tie play-based learning in every subject area. And based on what we learned and what we took from that training, the power points were amazing, we were able to see that play can be tied into every subject area.” During the interview, Teacher 2 described how she taught math (counting) in the dramatic play area using the plastic fruit. She described how she taught math (counting) in the dramatic play area using the plastic fruit. Teacher 2 provided the example, “I see you have two oranges, can I buy two more from your store? How many oranges do I have all together?” Teacher 2 felt teaching content in a natural setting that mimicked real-world experiences was more meaningful to children.

Although kindergarten teachers expressed their satisfaction with the Kindergarten Seminar trainings and the master teachers valuable support during the first two years of the initiative with implementing play in their classrooms, they shared differing views when discussing the amount of support they needed to be successful when using TS GOLD, the performance-based assessment system.

Teacher 1 felt the KS trainings were adequate, but did not feel she had enough training on the KEA performance-based assessment tool they were being asked to implement. Teacher 1 expressed, “I think I would need training on the use of the tablets and the input. I never saw that because we never did it.” The Kindergarten Seminar trainings did not include technical training on the use of the online performance-based assessment tool and teachers did not receive technology equipment to collect the data. Master teachers provided onsite KEA training to those KS teachers whose administrators agreed to implement the online performance-based assessment tool. Out of the five schools identified for KS training for their kindergarten teachers, only two schools implemented the KEA performance-based assessment tool. Master teacher logs noted
multiple coaching sessions to assist kindergarten seminar teachers with implementing the online observation-based assessment system. It was also noted that teachers used required benchmark data, consisting of paper-based assessments as data for the system, in lieu of the recommended observation-based method of collecting assessment data. Master teachers recognized this was a major frustration for teachers. Master Teacher 1 stated, “Essentially they were doing double work. They were giving the paper assessment, grading it and then trying to assess where it would fall on the progression. They were not collecting the data the way they should have. It was not authentic.” Observation-based assessment data is collected in a natural environment, where children are engaged in meaningful authentic tasks. Observation data captures learning on an on-going basis to provide teachers with information on how to scaffold learning in the moment. The mandated benchmark assessments made it difficult to utilize the observation-based assessment system the way it was intended to be used, and hindered the effectiveness of the initiative.

Although the training, coaching sessions, and support from their building administrators was valued by the KS kindergarten teachers and contributed to play experiences taking place in their classrooms, there were other factors that were lacking for complete implementation success such as adequate materials and furniture. The district provided the kindergarten seminar teachers with a few pieces of dramatic play furniture to assist them with facilitating some play experiences throughout the day. The district acquired donated furniture from a vendor which meant the teachers did not receive a complete play set-up for their classrooms that consisted of all center area furniture and adequate materials for each center. Teacher 1 expressed concerns regarding classroom set-up when she stated, “But I know we didn’t have the resources like the way they showed us. My classroom didn’t look like that. I don’t have blocks, as many blocks as I should
have for my whole class.” The teacher participants did not feel the furniture they were provided was enough to support the play initiative. Teacher 2 stated, “In the kindergarten class we don’t have a lot of shelves where children can access materials very easily. We have a lot of tables in our classroom so that would probably be something, our classroom set-up would definitely have to change.” Meaningful play depends on the teacher’s ability to plan for experiences that reflect real-world situations, and provide them with the opportunity to facilitate rich interactions through conversations about the materials children are interacting with throughout the environment.

**Theme 3- Curriculum Challenges**

Curriculum challenges was largely noted by all of the participants. The participants felt the current kindergarten programs being implemented to support the curriculum was inappropriate for kindergarten and did not allow for play experiences to take place. Play experiences allow for children’s demonstrations of learning to unfold organically. Children are engaged in purposeful, child-centered learning that supports investigations of topics through exploration and play. These are authentic experiences that promote social interactions among children and adults as well as critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Children learn about the world around them through the context of play. The current kindergarten curriculum being implemented in the district consists of scripted, teacher directed programs that require paper-pencil tasks. Teacher 1 felt the current kindergarten programs were too scripted and didn’t allow for children to interact with each other. She stated, “I don’t think they are meeting the social emotional and developmental aspect.” Teacher 1 expressed she was able to work on important social-emotional and developmental skills during the once a week Exploratorium time, but not during the course of her regular kindergarten schedule.
Observations were done in the Exploratorium that was created by the kindergarten teachers and school administration. KS teachers and school administration expressed the current kindergarten curriculum the district has mandated, is extremely scripted and does not allow time for play-based learning to occur. As a way to provide kindergarten students with opportunities to engage in play experiences that reflect real-world instructional practices facilitated by meaningful student and teacher interactions, they created an Exploratorium. The Exploratorium was accessed once a week on a rotating schedule by the kindergarten teachers. During the observation, students were able to choose play areas they were interested in. Each area contained materials to engage a small group of students in an activity using play as a context for learning. Students constructed towers out of blocks, built structures using magnatiles, tested push and pull objects they created, and tested forces in motion. While kindergarten students engaged in conversations to create or test their structures, the teacher and classroom aide circulated around the room and asked questions to extend students thinking and enhance play experiences. The following are a few of the questions asked during play: What did you notice about the ball when it rolled down the tunnel?, Tell me about the materials you chose for your tower?, What do you think will happen if you add a triangle to this side of the roof?, How can you make it stronger?, What did you think about when you added wheels?, What other ways could you use these?. Although the KS teachers at the Sunny Hill School are providing children with play-based experiences using the Exploratorium, it should be noted that this is not a district-wide practice. The teachers at Sunny Hill School expressed, having the Exploratorium provided them with an opportunity to integrate play into the kindergarten schedule, while still meeting the challenges of adhering to the scripted programs they were required to implement. Teachers were able to extend concepts and skills taught using the scripted programs, into a more natural
learning environment where children had an opportunity to apply what they learned to real world experiences. Teachers also felt the Exploratorium provided them with an opportunity to practice what they had learned during the kindergarten seminar trainings.

Teacher 2 expressed concerns regarding the number of scripted programs that were in kindergarten. Kindergarten teachers are implementing an ELA program, which they described as a one stop shop that addresses all the components of literacy. During the kindergarten math block, teachers are expected to implement task-oriented scripted math lessons that are provided to them. Teacher 2 stated, “The schedule that we have is a pretty tight schedule. We are doing phonics for 40 and then we’re doing reading for 40 and then there is writing for 40, so everything is pretty much set. We also have a math task from the district that we’re doing, so it’s a pretty tight schedule.” Teachers felt they would be able to engage children in more meaningful learning if they had the opportunity to incorporate play-based learning in content area learning. Teachers described how they incorporated literacy into play experiences by having children act out familiar stories using props to retell and develop new endings to stories. After the play experience they would provide the children with opportunities to write about what they did while playing as a way to practice writing skills. Master teacher coaching logs noted site-based coaching sessions that focused on how to connect literature and mathematical concepts into play-based learning opportunities for children. The master teachers work entailed making play connects to the current structured programs being used in kindergarten.

Master teacher 1 felt the implementation of scripted programs were not appropriate for kindergarten students and did not support how children learn best. Master Teacher 1 shared, “Right now, kindergarteners are handed a pencil and paper and are given timeframes. They are expected to follow too much of a structured environment, so children are almost expected to
follow a cookie cutter type of learning or behavior which is not normal because even adults don’t follow that.” Children learn best through having multiple opportunities to practice skills in various ways. Student choice in learning takes place through the use of various materials and presentations of concepts. During the observation in the Exploratorium, children were able to test out their structures using a variety of materials. Children were able to observe concepts using various lenses which provided them with different perspectives and ideas about their learning. A few children building a structure in the block area were able to build that same structure on a smaller scale using magnatiles. The change in materials presented new possibilities and things to consider when replicating the structure. Flexible learning environments that support play create spaces for children to engage in academic learning that requires children to think about content from various perspectives.

Master teacher 2 highlighted the lack of flexibility in the kindergarten schedule that would allow time for play to take place. Due to the lack of flexibility, teachers felt they did not have time to revisit important skills that children required more time to practice. Master teacher 2 stated, “They are not allowed to you know, move away from what the district has set forth, and that’s a problem because it’s…I’ll keep going with it even if the kids don’t get it, so you’re moving on to more difficult concepts or skills and children don’t even have the foundation or the basic understanding of it.” Master teacher’s understanding of KS teachers’ frustration with implementing play was derived from ongoing dialogue that occurred during coaching sessions with the KS teachers. Kindergarten teachers expressed to the master teachers, they wanted to implement play in their daily schedule but the curricular and program mandates dictated by central office did not allow for it.
During the Kindergarten Seminar trainings, kindergarten teachers and master teachers expressed the overwhelming concern of a lack of support by district-wide administration would hinder their ability to implement play-based learning. Lack of autonomy was identified as a subtheme to curriculum challenges, as all of the participants expressed their frustrations with the freedom teachers were afforded to choose an instructional approach to teaching content in kindergarten classrooms. Although teachers felt they had sufficient training to implement play in their classrooms, they did not feel they were able to alter the implementation of the scripted programs to allow for play experiences. Master teacher coaches discussed kindergarten teacher’s frustration with wanting to implement the play practices they were exposed to in the KS training, but were hesitant due to the varying curricular directives from building and district-wide administrators. Master teacher 1 captured kindergarten teachers’ anxiety around the current program mandates when she stated, “They would try and then just give up because they felt like their job would be on the line.” Kindergarten teachers were fearful of punitive repercussions if they deviated from the scripted programs. District-wide and school-based administrators who did not support or understand a play-based approach to learning, were expecting to see a step by step execution of the kindergarten programs while conducting walkthroughs and observations. Teachers did not want to risk receiving low evaluation scores due to implementing play in their classrooms.

Master teacher coaches were a key factor in providing support for kindergarten teachers during the KEA initiative. Master teachers provided embedded coaching support with instructional practices to reflect play experiences, and assisted with setting up the classroom environment to support rich play experiences. Although support was provided, the master teachers did not feel their efforts were successful in all of the kindergarten seminar (KS)
teachers’ classrooms. Master teacher 1 stated, “Not all administrators were on board with us, and we went in and supported them with room arrangement and you know…doing everything, and it was for nothing because they never used any of it.” Master teacher 1 did not feel kindergarten teachers had autonomy over how they implemented instructional practices and the curriculum in their classrooms. District-wide supervisors and building-based administrators, who did not attend the KS trainings, would often want to see the scripted programs implemented with fidelity. Master teacher 1 stated, “When we would go in to visit and they’d say, they wanted to see them doing XY and Z, so they would stop short with everything even knowing it was the best thing for children.” Master teachers felt all school-based and district-wide administrators who oversaw the KEA Kindergarten Seminar teachers should have been required to attend the KEA Kindergarten Seminar trainings. KS teachers received mixed messages from administrators that caused confusion and a lot of frustration for the KS teachers and master teachers. Early childhood district-wide supervisors expected master teachers to provide support to kindergarten teachers with the shift in instructional and assessment practices, while content area district-wide and school-based administrators wanted to see the scripted programs implemented.

In master teacher 2’s experience, there were some KS teachers who had the environment set up to support play, but did not have the autonomy to implement it. Master teacher 2 stated, “I don’t know how often those children actually got to play with those materials because administrators, when they would come in, are expecting to see certain things. Some teachers, you know they want to try because they know that best practice says play should be in kindergarten, but again the district is dictating so much to them that they’re unable to.” Varying messages and expectations from opposing administrative groups greatly influenced teachers daily instructional choices in kindergarten classrooms.
It was interesting to hear the administrator’s perspectives on the challenges of the kindergarten curriculum. Although the district had set programs for kindergarten teachers to implement, both administrator participants felt it wasn’t exactly necessary to follow the programs in order to teach the kindergarten skills and concepts outlined in the NJ Student Learning Standards. The administrators felt strongly about teachers having the freedom to be creative and make modifications to the kindergarten programs in order to meet the needs of their students. Administrator 1 discussed how she changed the kindergarten schedule to add an academic choice period once a week in the Exploratorium, for students to explore, play and learn. Administrator 1 stated, “That’s not what the district told us to do but I have to meet the needs of the students. Central office told me I have to do it. They didn’t tell me how to do it.” This was not a common view from all of the KS administrators. Administrator 1 attended the kindergarten seminar trainings and worked closely with master teachers and district-wide early childhood administrators to better understand the initiative and support her teachers. Master teachers and teacher participants noted the support they received from Administrator 1 despite the curricular mandates.

Administrator 2 expressed the need for teacher autonomy when considering instructional practices, in order to teach relevant content effectively. Administrator 2 questioned, “So how are you then unpacking the standards and breaking it down to then be able, as the teacher, to scaffold?” She also stated, “I think you look at it again, the curriculum, it’s what we teach and how we teach it, and how we implement it as teachers.” The administrators clearly thought it was more important to implement appropriate instructional practices that met the students’ needs rather than follow the scripted programs prescribed by the district. Although the administrator participants supported play in kindergarten classrooms, they were unable to change instructional
practices while implementing the mandated kindergarten programs, which led to the creation of
the Exploratorium. The teacher participants acknowledge their administrators’ efforts to create
time for play experiences despite the scripted programs they were being asked to implement. It
should be noted, not all of the KEA Kindergarten Seminar administrators allowed for program
modifications in their kindergarten programs based on the master teachers coaching experiences
with their teachers.

**Theme 4- Push Down Effect**

Participants expressed feelings of discouragement when discussing the over looming pressure
to prepare children for first grade due to test scores in the later grades. Accountability pressures
to meet standards-based expectations in the upper grades has begun to make a significant impact
on kindergarten. All of the participants felt curricular mandates in kindergarten were directly
related to standardized test scores in grades three through eight. Due to low achievement scores
in the district, district-wide content area administrators required scripted programs in
kindergarten in an effort to manage what was being taught on a large scale. Kindergarten
teachers are expected to teach more content during the course of the school year in order to
prepare children for first grade. Kindergarten teachers felt pressure from administrators to cover
all of the content within the timeframes they were provided for the academic year.

Push down pressures participants described were directly related to their interactions with
district-wide and school-based administrators. In order to meet stringent content timeframes,
teachers felt pressure to engage kindergarten children in rote, didactic methods of teaching, using
the programs that reflect direct instruction and impose paper-pencil tasks to teach academic
content, in an effort to cover more content. Master teacher 1 described her concerns with
pressuring kindergarten teachers to cover more content using scripted programs when she stated,
“We are getting the push down from the authorities in the district and it ends up being the classroom teacher who has to put these strains on the children that are not developmentally appropriate.” Changes to the curriculum and instructional practices that reflected more paper and pencil instruction and long whole group times, were mandated by district level administration and reinforced by building level administration. The didactic instructional practices were manifested by academic test scores in later grades, which showed deficits in reading and problem-solving skills in mathematics. The participants felt, skills and concepts addressed in first grade in past years, were now a part of the standard kindergarten curriculum. Administrator 2 stated, “Those were not the standards 10, 15, 20 years ago and many years before that when we were in kindergarten, for the simple fact that a lot of that is getting pushed down.” Administrator 1 stressed the importance of having vertical articulation meetings with teachers to ensure they are aware of what the expectations are for the next grade level due to the push down effect.

Master teacher 2 expressed similar concerns as administrator 2 regarding the type of skills and concepts they are now seeing in kindergarten that were addressed in later grades years ago. Due to current hyperbolic optics over poor test scores in the district, curricular and instructional practices continue to lack opportunities for meaningful play in kindergarten classrooms. Master teacher 2 expressed her experience in the district with pushing down curricular practices that are not appropriate, “You know it’s pushing down curriculum, we are pushing down right now, so the expectation is not appropriate.” Master teacher 2 described play as a “dirty word” in the district.

Standardized testing was viewed as an ineffective way of measuring student performance that ultimately affected authentic learning experiences taking place in kindergarten classrooms.
Rising standardized test scores can provide districts with additional funding and provide superintendents with monetary bonuses. Master teacher 1 expressed, “Unfortunately the money is behind standardized testing. It’s unfortunate, but testing has a different incentive, so I think testing should never be standardized. I think it should be more organic.” Providing children with a variety of modalities to demonstrate their understanding of skills and concepts over time, was viewed as a more valid means of assessment by master teacher 1. All of the participants described this type of formative assessment collection through a play-based approach, as a more accurate means of data collection to show children’s true ability levels on a progression of learning.

The master teacher participants attributed the rise of academic accountability in kindergarten to standardized test scores. Teachers feel pressured to teach academic standards using paper pencil methods as a way to attain and measure mastery. Teachers are less likely to shift from didactic methods of instruction to a play-based approach, due to push down effects from administration. Administrators are faced with pressures to attain high academic standardized test scores. This pressure results in administrators reinforcing one size fits all instructional practices, as a means of ensuring teachers are addressing the standards and preparing students for “the test.” While discussing the effects of standardized tests had on kindergarten, Administrator 2 shared, “Those standards are just going to keep coming. You know they’re going to lower them and lower them, meaning the higher grades are going to come lower, so who knows what we are going to be teaching our kindergarten students next.”

Summary

The aim of this of this intrinsic case study was to explore how teachers’ perspectives and experiences in today’s rigorous kindergarten classrooms influence the implementation of play-
based learning. All of the participants involved in the study were a part of the initial KEA initiative. The KEA initiative was developed to shift kindergarten instructional and assessment practices to reflect a play-based approach to learning and assess students in authentic learning experiences through an observation-based assessment system. All of the participants expressed the value of play to children’s cognitive and social-emotional development, and found ways to implement play despite the districts mandated, scripted kindergarten programs. All of the participants felt play supported developmentally appropriate academic and social experiences for children, and shared a common understanding of developmentally appropriate practices based on children’s age and ability level. The participants indicated a lack of these practices in today’s kindergarten classrooms.

To implement and sustain play practices, teachers would need support from administrators and master teacher coaches. The kindergarten seminar training provided both teachers and administrators with valuable information and models for implementing play, and aligning play experiences to their curriculum. Administrator participants altered kindergarten schedules to allow for the creation of a play period once a week in an Exploratorium, that was created to support meaningful play. On-going coaching was provided to teacher participants by the master teachers to ensure an understanding of appropriate play experiences using the environment to teach critical kindergarten skills. Teacher participants expressed satisfaction with the training and coaching from master teachers, but did acknowledge the lack of adequate furniture and materials in their classrooms hindered their ability to fully implement play in their classrooms.

A major theme expressed by all of the participants was the lack of autonomy teachers have to make instructional changes due to the current kindergarten curriculum that is supported by scripted programs. Current programs in kindergarten that support English Language Arts and
Mathematics instruction, follow a step by step, scripted instructional pattern, and do not support authentic interactions between teachers, students, and the learning environment. Teachers are fearful of being subjected to punitive repercussions for altering programs to allow for play. As a result, play has been abandoned in the kindergarten classrooms and left to take place in the Exploratorium once a week. It is important to note, the Exploratorium is unique to the teacher participants school, and is not a common practice across the district in schools with kindergarten programs.

Standardized testing in the higher grades has elevated accountability in kindergarten. Teachers and students are held to high performance standards due to low test scores in the higher grades. Master teachers and administrator participants described the shift they witnessed regarding the level of skill expectancy in kindergarten, and how this elevated level of academic skill set has fostered more paper pencil and didactic methods of instruction in kindergarten classrooms. Expected accountability levels to achieve, felt by teachers and administrators, has led to the implementation of teacher-directed programs, and skills once achieved in first grade now being pushed down for mastery in kindergarten.

The following chapter will discuss the findings, discussion, limitations and implications of this intrinsic case study, derived from the themes that emerged from the research data.
Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings, Limitations and Implications

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how teachers’ perspectives and experiences in kindergarten classrooms influence the implementation of play-based learning. This study employed a qualitative, intrinsic case study to explore kindergarten teachers’ perspectives and experiences of play-based learning. Using an intrinsic case study research approach provided an appropriate lens for capturing the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers who received kindergarten seminar training (KS) through the Kindergarten Entry Assessment (KEA) initiative. The research focused on play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms where teachers received targeted training and support on developmentally appropriate curricular and assessment practices, as part of a state initiative. The kindergarten seminar teachers (KS) received five trainings throughout the course of the school year that addressed classroom environment, NJ kindergarten implementation guidelines, curriculum/play-based learning, and assessment (KEA initiative). Kindergarten seminar teachers also received classroom furniture to support a play environment and follow-up coaching from early childhood master teacher coaches. Although kindergarten seminar teachers were provided with resources and training, play-based practices may not have been sustained. The aim of this study was to explore how teachers’ perspectives and experiences kindergarten classrooms influence the implementation of play-based learning. The researcher was interested in finding out whether or not play-based practices were being implemented among the kindergarten seminar teachers who were a part of the initial initiative to shift instructional practices in kindergarten, and uncover the reasons for the outcome.

The case study focused on participants who continued to implement play-based practices well after training ended. Participants included two kindergarten teachers, two master teacher
coaches and two school administrators. The participants were chosen based on their involvement in the Kindergarten Entry Assessment initiative and kindergarten seminar training. Data was collected in the form of semi-structured interviews, observations, and master teacher coaching notes. The interview data was analyzed using In Vivo coding. A triangulation process was employed using interview data, observation data, and master teacher coaching notes, to establish true meaning from various resources on themes that emerged.

**Findings Related to the Theoretical Framework**

Developmental theories served as the building blocks for this study. The utilization of developmental theories to guide my research provided clear connections between research-based best practices and the type of instructional practices teachers are using, as well as their beliefs related to early childhood training and actual experiences. The Kindergarten Seminar training and observation-based assessment system used for the KEA initiative, were both grounded in research supportive of Jean Piaget’s Stages of Cognitive Development and Lev Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Both were chosen as a frame for this study as evidence for how children learn relative to the stages of development they experience over time. Vygotsky’s work demonstrates the benefits of child interactions with more knowledgeable children and adults as a way to construct new knowledge, bridging the gap between a child’s current level and the potential for more advanced understanding (Pyle, Prioletta & Poliszczuk, 2017). The participants in this study understood the role of the teacher as a facilitator of learning. Participants described purposely planned play experiences where the teacher role was to guide learning experiences through play. Teachers and students in these play experiences would use questioning to expand on and construct their own understandings of concepts and skills. Children would be able to learn from more advanced peers and adults, while interacting with various materials in the environment.
Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development describes the importance of social support in advancing one’s ability level, where a child is engaged in learning experiences slightly above their current developmental level (Mooney, 2013). Children were observed creating and exploring with materials in the Exploratorium, while engaged in conversations with their peers and the adults in the room. Children and teachers asked questions that often resulted in changing or adding on to a structure or expanding on an idea. The teacher facilitated environment fostered a learning space that was developmentally appropriate and supported the growth of critical academic and social skills, that could be measured in the moment.

Piaget’s research supports the critical relationship of tying rich interactions between young children and their environment, to their overall development, which is supportive of a play-based approach to learning. Piaget claimed that children construct their own knowledge by doing the real work themselves, creating their own understanding of the world around them (Mooney, 2013). Both developmental theorists understood the importance of social interactions and interactions within the context of one’s environment, to the overall growth and development of children. Although play was not infused throughout the course of the daily kindergarten schedule, the teacher and administrator participants at the Sunny Hill School found alternative ways to infuse play in their kindergarten program. The participants felt it was important to create an environment rich with materials and clearly defined learning centers that would simulate real-world learning experiences for children. Piaget’s work highlighted the importance of the play environment and its role in assisting children make sense of the learning while supporting cognitive development (Pyle, Prioletta & Poliszczuk, 2017). Children’s lived experiences are considered relevant and are integrated in classroom experiences which are reflected through cultural artifacts in the classrooms as well as the use of children’s native and
social languages spoken. Delpit (2002) highlights the relationship between motivation in children and educational experiences and connections to children’s cultural lives and personal interests. Children are able to internalize information and make connections to academics if concepts and skill are related to their actual lived experiences and language. When considering the findings, the participants shared similar beliefs about the benefits of play-based learning when practiced in learning environments that mimicked children's real-world experiences. All of the participants shared anecdotal experiences of children engaged in guided play experiences that deepened and expanded on their understanding of skills and concepts being taught through hands-on exploration and play connected to children's interests and community. The participants felt a deepening of learning occurs when meaningful play interactions are connected to materials in the environment that are supportive of children's everyday lives. Deeper learning takes place when the classroom environment is filled with meaningful and accessible materials, classroom materials are labeled in the languages spoken in the classroom, play experiences are connected to the community, and teacher-child and child-child interactions include rich language that scaffolds learning. Through teacher questioning, peer to peer interactions, and interactions with meaningful and relatable materials in the environment observed, children were able to expand on ideas and structures they were working on, or change the direction of something they were working on due to new information acquired through those interactions.

Findings Related to the Literature

The interview data, observation data, and master teacher coaching notes, assisted in answering the primary research question and one secondary research question. When addressing the first question, How do teachers’ perspectives and experiences influence the implementation of play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms?, three major themes emerged (champions of
play, adequate support, and curriculum challenges). Related to the first theme, champions of play, all of the participants felt strongly about the benefits of play in kindergarten classrooms. Each participant made recurring statements highlighting the benefits of play to children’s ability to learn both social-emotional and academic skills. Participants felt play supported high student engagement, collaboration, problem solving and learning of important skills. All of the participants pointed out the need to make learning fun through play. To the participants, play equaled learning. They felt when children are engaged in play situations, where they are able to interact with one another and with materials intentionally place in learning environments, they are able to make deeper connections to the content and how it relates to the world around them. The findings in this study revealed the participants ideas and beliefs about play-based learning were similar to the literature when looking at the research on play as it relates to children’s academic achievement, social and emotional development, and overall well-being. Play-based learning provides children with opportunities to use their imaginations, experiment with role play, and make symbolic connections with objects (Wood, 2014). Play environments contribute to children reaching their developmental and neurological potential by nurturing and contributing to physical, emotional, psychological, and social development (Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2013). This study confirmed teachers’ beliefs regarding play-based learning, being the most authentic and developmentally appropriate approach to teach academic and social skills to kindergarten students.

Developmentally appropriate practices emerged as a sub-theme to champions of play. All of the participants noted instructional settings and materials such as, learning centers with furniture like dramatic play, discovery, and block areas, as well as materials such as magnatiles, blocks, counting materials, and dress up clothes for role play, should be used with kindergarten students.
Participants felt the learning environment and objects/materials children interact with were developmentally appropriate and support how children learn best. All of the participants referenced the need to meet children where they are developmentally in order to uncover their full developmental and academic potential. The participants felt strongly that play was a more appropriate way to teach academic skills, allowing for inquiry and exploration of materials connected to academic content, instead of paper-pencil methods. Participants felt paper-pencil methods of instruction were frustrating for kindergarten children and did not provide opportunities to extend thinking and nurture complex understandings about academic content as well as provide opportunities for high engagement social interactions. The participants perceptions of play were supportive of the literature that championed the benefits of play to children's personal, social, and academic learning (Pyle & DeLuca, 2017). Play contexts provide children the opportunity to guide their own learning and learn at a pace that supports their individual development (Pyle & DeLuca, 2017; Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2013).

**Perceptions and Beliefs.** Consistent with the literature, kindergarten teachers’ beliefs and perceptions of play aren’t always reflected in their daily practice due to various extrinsic factors. Fresseha and Pyle’s (2016) study of 101 elementary Ontario teachers provided insights on how teachers perspectives influenced the implementation of play in kindergarten classrooms. Factors such as teachers varying definitions of play as well as academic curricular and assessment challenges limited their engagement in play. Although teachers shared positive beliefs about play, current expectations in kindergarten caused a shift in the way kindergarten teachers approached instructional practices. The teacher participants in this study were willing to implement play in their classrooms, and felt play was a developmentally appropriate approach to learning for kindergarten age children. Although they felt this way, the teacher participants were
not able to sustain play practices in their classrooms due to the scripted curricula that is required in all kindergarten classrooms across the district. Despite all of the training and effort put forth by teachers and master teacher coaches, play had not been sustained during the course of the kindergarten day. When looking at past research, teacher perceptions reflected feelings of kindergarten becoming more academic in nature and teachers who implemented didactic practices felt that parents and administration had a significant influence over teaching than they did (Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2006). The literature suggests over the past two decades kindergarten has made a drastic shift from developmentally appropriate learning practices, centered on exploration, play and social interactions, to highly prescriptive curricular and test preparation with a focus on academic skill building (Bassok, Latham, & Rorem, 2016).

Socialization emerged as a second sub-them to champions of play. All of the participants felt strongly that play-based learning supported socialization and healthy interactions among children and fostered collaboration, problem solving, and creativity. The participants demonstrated supportive attitudes towards play being a critical component to learning of critical social skills through collaboration and problem solving. Participants felt play-based learning provides children with opportunities to work out problems and learn how to effectively communicate with one another to complete a task. All of the participants felt important socials skills are learned through play such as sharing, using words to communicate needs effectively, and how to self-regulate. The research has provided theoretical and empirical evidence for the use of play-based learning to support the growth of developmental areas such as social competence (Pyle, Poliszczuk & Danniels, 2018; Binder, 2014).

**Teacher Training and Support.** Adequate support was a theme that emerged from all of the participants in the form of building administrator support, kindergarten seminar trainings,
embedded coaching from master teachers, and materials and supplies. Master teacher coaches provided support in the form of room arrangement and provided some coaching on how to address specific content related standards through play as well as technical support with the observation-based online assessment system. During the interviews, participants shared varying viewpoints on the level of support they were provided. Overall, all of the participants shared positive attitudes towards the level of support they received to implement play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms. The teacher participants did not share similar viewpoints on the level of training received. Although the teacher participants agreed the Kindergarten Seminar training provided them with enough information to implement play, one teacher participant felt it would have been beneficial to have someone provide embedded coaching in the kindergarten classrooms to show teachers how to infuse play with the current curriculum. The literature highlighted teachers’ dissatisfaction with in-service workshops that were structured at a formal level and less focused on the real needs of teachers (Gianina, 2013). Consistent with the literature, teacher training on early childhood best practices is necessary for the effective implementation of play-based learning. Lee, Baik and Charlesworth’s (2006) study examined teachers’ implementation of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) in kindergarten classrooms, dividing teachers into two groups based on what they believed about DAP after receiving in-service workshops. The findings revealed, after each DAP in-service workshop, there was significantly greater improvement on a scaffolding measure of developmentally appropriate teachers, opposed to developmentally inappropriate teachers. The research highlights, after teacher training was provided on early childhood best practices, there was significantly greater improvement on the implementation of developmentally appropriate practices. Teacher participants in this study shared their disappointment with the lack of
technical training on the observation-based assessment system linked to the Kindergarten Entry Assessment initiative. Teacher participants felt if additional support was offered, consisting of continuous training with the online assessment system, they would have experienced better success with implementation.

As a way to assist teachers with implementing play in their classrooms, they were provided with some furniture to create play centers. Although the kindergarten teachers received furniture for their classrooms to create centers that support play, one teacher participant did not feel she had enough materials to support a rich play learning environment. The other teacher participant felt she had an abundance of materials but not enough shelving to provide access to all materials for all children. The challenge for everyone was the inconsistency of materials across classrooms to support play as well as the inability to move away from the scripted programs mandated by the district. The participants described their frustrations with not having adequate materials and center furniture to support a play environment. The participants described ways they used materials in the environment to teach academic concepts and skills as well as provide opportunities for children to practice interacting with one another in appropriate ways. A study conducted by Steber, Vogt, Wolf, Hauser and Rechsteiner (2013) to explore the use of board games in a play-based learning environment to teach mathematics in early grades, found that it was an effective method for teaching and providing an adaptive and motivating setting to meet the needs of all children. The results from this study show a clear connection between the classroom environment and the ability to create meaningful play experiences for children. All of the participants in this study understood the importance of play-based learning to children’s social-emotional and cognitive development, but were not able to create consistent and sustainable play-based learning that simulated real-world experiences and rich interactions, due
to the lack of adequate materials. In the face of this challenge, the administration at Sunny Hill School created an Exploratorium that teachers have access to once a week for a forty-minute period. The Exploratorium is a classroom set up with play centers that support learning of academic content through exploration and inquiry-based learning. Teachers facilitate learning through questioning and meaningful interactions with children that extend thinking and deeper understandings of complex concepts. The administrator participants felt, although they could not change the daily structure of the kindergarten programs mandated by the district, they could support teachers with implementing play-based experiences by creating the Exploratorium. Master teacher participants felt this was a good effort put forth by the administration of Sunny Hill School, but was not enough for kindergarten children to reap the benefits of play. Teacher participants were grateful to have the play experience, even though it was only once a week. The research highlights the necessity of creating play environments that are rich with materials that encourage inquiry-based learning and support developmental and academic skills. The set-up of the learning environment is critical to promoting opportunities for children to practice social interactions as well as constructing deeper understandings of concepts through interactions with various materials in the classroom. In this study, the teacher participants felt their classroom environments could not support the teaching of important concepts and skills through play.

Curriculum Challenges. All of the participants referenced curriculum challenges that emerged when trying to move forward with the implementation of play-based learning. The biggest challenge they all faced were the teacher-directed, scripted curricula they were mandated to follow by district-wide administration. The literature suggests that a heavy focus on academic, didactic methods of instruction in kindergarten did not translate into high achievement
in later grades (Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2006). Parker and Neuharth-Pritchett’s (2006) study identified specific reasons that impacted kindergarten teachers’ instructional practice such as, pressure to prepare children for the next grade and the feeling of having to follow a scripted curriculum. The literature discusses the negative impact scripted curricula, teaching and assessment methods have on teacher-child relationships and is a simplistic and unsound model of how children learn (Miller & Almon, 2009). All of the participants felt the kindergarten schedule was too stringent and did not leave any time for play. Participants felt kindergarten students are expected to follow too many scripted programs that follow a cookie-cutter pattern of learning. All participants felt children are not provided time for choice and multiple opportunities to practice skills in various ways. Due to the lack of flexibility, teacher participants felt they did not have time to revisit important skills that children need more time to practice. In previous research conducted, teachers face the daily struggle of balancing their own beliefs about play with district curricular expectations and mandates. In the literature, teachers expressed it was difficult to find time to implement play in their classrooms, due to academic curricular expectations and a hyperbolic emphasis on assessment. The district in this study, is currently implementing a scripted ELA program that teachers described as a one stop shop that addresses all the components of literacy. During the kindergarten math block, teachers are expected to implement scripted, task-oriented math lessons. Each program component in literacy and math requires a forty-minute block of time that requires a step-by-step format of activities. All of the participants expressed their concern for this type of learning in kindergarten. They all expressed the need for kindergarten children to have access to hands-on learning experiences that emerge organically from engaging with and manipulating of materials in the environment.
The master teachers and administrators at Sunny Hill School did not feel they were able to change current kindergarten programs to support a play-based learning approach. Autonomy emerged as a subtheme to curriculum challenges as all of the participants expressed frustration due to the lack of input they have with instructional decision making. This was most frustrating to the master teachers who worked feverishly to support teachers with implementing play in their classrooms. Master teachers developed trainings, modeled lessons and provided teachers with instructional materials to assist with the intended instructional shift in kindergarten. Master teachers felt district-wide administration, who dictated kindergarten programming, were not included in the state-initiated Kindergarten Entry Assessment and kindergarten seminar trainings, which lead to miscommunication and mixed messages presented to teachers and building level administrators. Teacher participants often expressed to master teacher coaches that district-wide content area supervisors would direct them to stick to the rigid programs which were not supportive of a play-based approach. The school-based administrators at Sunny Hill School did feel teachers should be able to use various instructional methods and have creative freedom when teaching. Although they felt this way, the required kindergarten programs were still in place and followed tightly by the kindergarten teachers.

**Political Influences.** When addressing the secondary question: How do kindergarten teachers believe testing and accountability expectations have influenced their attitudes towards the implementation of play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms, push-down effect emerged as a major theme. All of the participants referenced the pressure they feel to have kindergarten children perform at academic levels that were once considered appropriate for first grade. The literature highlights the pressure to attain high academic expectations in higher grades and the need to follow scripted curricula significantly impacts teacher’s ability to
implement play experiences. Heightened academic demands have influenced the use of didactic, teacher-directed instruction and decreased child-centered play in the classroom (Pyle & Alaca, 2018). The literature uncovered teachers daily struggle of finding a balance of implementing a play-based approach to learning while being held accountable for preparing children for subsequent grades (Pyle, Prioleta & Poliszczuk, 2017). Consistent with the literature, the participants in this study felt academic and assessment pressure to achieve, has influenced the districts decisions to mandate the implementation of scripted curricula. Due to low standardized state test scores in grades three through eight, expectations for kindergarten students to do more, is a constant struggle felt by all of the participants in this study. In order to achieve more in kindergarten, the participants expressed the concern of kindergarten teachers being required to employ didactic, inappropriate methods of teaching that include teacher directed and paper-pencil methods of instruction. Contributing to the push-down effect across the research, is the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) that was thought to be the cause of intense pressure that principals and teachers felt about their students' performance on high-stakes assessments that led to an “accountability shovedown” (Bassok, Latham, & Rorem, 2016; Hatch, 2002; Kagan & Kauerz, 2007). Administrator participants are under pressure to maintain high levels of academic performance in all grade levels. Administrator participants feel the increasing accountability framework in kindergarten from district-wide program administrators, which makes it difficult to shift instructional practices that support a play-based approach during the course of the daily kindergarten schedule. Due to the unique make-up of Sunny Hill School, administrators were able to create one forty-minute opportunity for play-based learning per week, to allow for some autonomy over instructional practices in kindergarten.
Implications for Practice

This study has implications for the need to continue efforts to shift instructional practices in kindergarten classrooms that allow for play experiences to take place. This study provided insight on the importance of collaboration between kindergarten teachers and district-wide and school level administration to address kindergarten curriculum program challenges, as well as advocacy for play-based learning. Play has been identified as an approach to learning that is beneficial to children’s progress and growth in the five developmental domains: physical, language, social, emotional, and cognitive (Pyle, Prioletta & Poliszczuk, 2017). When listening to the participants voices, they felt play was important to children’s overall development and supported learning of critical academic skills in kindergarten. Through play, children are in control and hold power over their learning in the classroom by being afforded the opportunity to have choices and engage in authentic learning experiences. Although the participants perspectives toward play were positive and they shared a common understanding of guided play to teach academic content, their perspectives and beliefs about play were not enough to sustain play practices in their classrooms. Champions for play, would need to extend beyond the walls of the classroom and school buildings, in order to integrate play into the kindergarten daily schedule. Reaching beyond the micro level walls would include stakeholders at the macro level such as policy makers, state and federal agencies, Department of Education program specialist, and county level educational agencies that would be advocates for play in kindergarten classrooms. Stakeholders partnering at the macro level to ensure play was included in decision making about kindergarten program requirements and best practices, would assist in creating and sustaining play environments in kindergarten classrooms.
This study can provide state and district wide leaders with insight on areas to re-evaluate in the current kindergarten program. Children’s lack of play experiences as well as the underlying negative effects of scripted curriculum imposed on kindergarten children, due to an anxious school culture focused on academic achievement expectations, has detracted from the shift in practice. This study brought to light the number of scripted programs required in kindergarten. Although participants understood the need to move toward a play-based approach, mandates imposed by district-wide and school building based administrators, influenced inappropriate teacher practice in kindergarten classrooms. Participants felt, the district was working from a one size fits all concept, top-down method, teaching to a laundry list of objectives using a linear approach to teaching. In this study, stakeholders who were not directly involved in curricular decisions consist of building based administrators, master teachers and kindergarten teachers. Baumer and Van Horn (2014) suggest the need for all stakeholders to be at the table in the policy making process in an attempt to do what is best for our children. Participants felt there was a lack of consideration when it came to input from kindergarten teachers and early childhood leaders to develop curriculum or district policies with early childhood in mind.

The results from this study confirmed training and coaching support would need to be further developed by the district and supported by all district stakeholders. The initial Kindergarten Seminar training was identified as sufficient by the teacher participants, but follow-up coaching support was proven to be difficult due to the lack of autonomy master teacher coaches, kindergarten teachers, and building administrators had over changes in the daily implementation of scripted programs. The findings of this study clearly acknowledged the teacher’s gratitude and approval when it came to the training and support they were provided. Participants felt coaching and follow-up training opportunities would have been beneficial if teachers could
freely implement what they had learned in the trainings. The study also revealed, teacher participants would also have benefited from additional technical training support and technology to support the KEA observation-based assessment. State level program specialist should consider providing funding to districts for technology to support kindergarten teachers with gathering and assessing observation data of kindergarten children.

The physical space and center materials in the classroom are critical to developing and sustaining high quality learning experiences that are aligned to curricular requirements, in play-based flexible physical environments. Children learn how to interact with one another in play-based classrooms as well as solve problems and self-regulate. This study suggests the need to consider the physical environment in current kindergarten classrooms to ensure they are supportive of a play environment. The results from this study revealed inconsistent learning materials and center furniture across classrooms made it difficult for teachers to address academic learning through play. It is critical for kindergarten program specialists to consider the learning environment when creating play spaces for children. Teacher input on materials and center furniture that supports the curriculum would assist in ensuring children had adequate access to materials that encourage and promote learning. Participants felt they did not have enough play materials in their classrooms and center furniture to emulate what they learned during the kindergarten seminar trainings. Providing children with adequate space and materials during play not only supports academic learning but also promotes positive social interactions among children. Results from this study provided insight on the positive social benefits play has on children. Participants referenced, through play situations children were able to practice language and communicating their needs in appropriate ways. Collaboration among children during play, allows for working through conflicts through incidental learning and contributes to
acquiring of personal-social skills (Pyle & Alaca, 2018). The implications from this study can guide kindergarten program specialists to consider the social benefits play has on children when creating kindergarten curriculum that addresses the development of the whole child. Connections between the physical environment and development of social skills should be considered when shaping high quality kindergarten curriculum that supports choice and child ownership over learning.

**Limitations**

Due to the small sample size of participants, the variables that influenced the results of this study were minimal. There were six participants, four of which worked out of the same school. All of the participants in this intrinsic case study were a part of the Kindergarten Entry Assessment initiative and attended the Kindergarten Seminar trainings, and should not be generalized to all kindergarten settings in the district.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

Potential future research would include a mixed methods study to examine the academic and social outcomes of children in traditional kindergarten classrooms versus children’s experience in play-based kindergarten classrooms. Programmatic assessment data, classroom assessment data, interview and survey data collected from teachers, administrators, and parents, would be used to measure the effectiveness of kindergarten students’ overall development. Kindergarten children’s overall development would be examined in traditional kindergarten classrooms using mostly teacher-directed methods of instruction, and in kindergarten classrooms that are reflective of play-based environments. The aim would be to emphasize the benefits of play to children’s overall development as well as highlight the need to consistently implement play-based
approaches to teaching and learning across kindergarten classrooms and effectively utilize appropriate assessment methods, in order to meet children’s academic and developmental needs.

**Closing Statement**

The aim of this intrinsic case study was to explore how teachers’ perspectives and experiences kindergarten classrooms influence the implementation of play-based learning. The participants in this small intrinsic case study were identified as participants due to their involvement in the Kindergarten Entry Assessment state initiative and received kindergarten seminar training. All of the participants were champions of play and shared similar conceptual understandings of the benefits of play to children’s overall development, and referenced guided play experiences as an appropriate method of teaching academic content.

This study provided data that revealed insight on curricular challenges kindergarten teachers face on a daily basis, which hinder the implementation of play experiences. Despite the participants advocacy for play as well as the training and support they were provided, district curricular mandates and academic and assessment expectations in higher grades, continued to influence the teacher participants instructional choices that were reflective of a teacher-directed approach. The results from this study can provide valuable insights to state level program specialist and district administrators when creating kindergarten programs and future Kindergarten Entry Assessment initiatives that are supportive of play and can be sustained over time.
References


Appendix 1 - Exploratorium