

EDUCATORS' EXPERIENCES WITH THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PLAY-BASED  
LEARNING IN URBAN KINDERGARTEN CLASSROOMS

by

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## ABSTRACT

### EDUCATORS' EXPERIENCES WITH THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PLAY-BASED LEARNING IN URBAN KINDERGARTEN CLASSROOMS

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Under the Supervision of Dr. Leanne M. Evans

Kindergarten has evolved from a foundational space aimed at nurturing a joy of learning to regimented classrooms, crowded with expectations, accountability systems, and standardized practices. Because of these demands, kindergarten has been deemed the “new first grade” (Bassok et al., 2016; Brown et al., 2020; Miller & Almon, 2009). The changing nature of kindergarten has created tension for some early childhood educators as they strive to balance the push for academic preparation through didactic methods (Brown et al., 2020; Miller & Almon, 2009; Nicolopoulou, 2010; Pappano, 2010) and their pedagogical beliefs around play supporting developmental outcomes for young learners (Bongiorno, 2018; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2015; Miller & Almon, 2009; Nicolopoulou, 2010; Rand & Morrow, 2021; Stremmel et al., 2019; Yogman et al., 2018; Zosh et al., 2022). This is especially true in urban school settings, where denying children access to play and recess have been deemed “social justice issues” (Jarrett, 2013; Jarrett et al., 2015) that perpetuate inequitable, deficit perspectives of young learners.

This phenomenological case study aimed to better understand the experiences of educators with their implementation of play-based learning in urban kindergarten classrooms. The intent of this research was to determine the pedagogical beliefs the educators held with regard to play, the extent to which they incorporated play-based learning in their classrooms, and

the alignments and/or tensions that existed between the educators and the schools in which they were employed. Through analysis of detailed questionnaire responses, individual interview transcripts, and focus group conversation, three findings emerged from this inquiry: a) through their experiences, educators developed orientations as advocates for play; b) educators were deeply committed to their pedagogical beliefs about the importance of play and the foundations of kindergarten; and c) educators took action to balance the honoring of childhood through play with expected kindergarten outcomes. A model of critical play pedagogy is offered as an example of a specific representation of how play can be imagined through a critical perspective.

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To my husband, Matt. Thank you for your unwavering support, encouragement, and love throughout this process. I truly could not have completed this without you.

To my son, Luke. May you always have opportunities to experience the joy and wonder of learning through play.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .....	x
LIST OF TABLES .....	xi
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	xii
Chapter 1: Introduction .....	1
Study Background .....	1
Purpose of Research .....	4
Research Questions .....	5
Research Significance .....	6
Definitions of Terms, Concepts, and Abbreviations .....	8
Summary .....	11
Chapter 2: Review of Literature .....	13
Access to Play .....	13
School Playgrounds .....	14
Time for Play in Schools .....	16
Children’s Perceptions of School .....	19
An Overview of Play and Early Childhood Education .....	20
The Kindergarten Movement .....	22
Public Kindergarten Education .....	24
A Roadmap to the Current Landscape: Significant Movements in Education .....	27
Play and Play-Based Learning .....	31
Types of Play .....	33
Examples of Specific Types of Play. ....	36
Benefits of Play .....	37
Executive Function and Self-Regulation. ....	38
Social Skills. ....	39
Health Benefits .....	41
Content-Specific Benefits of Play .....	41
Play-Based Learning in Action. ....	45
Barriers to the Implementation and Utilization of Play-Based Learning .....	49
Culture of Accountability .....	49

Standardization .....	51
Deficit Perspectives .....	53
Academic Readiness.....	55
Pedagogical Beliefs of Educators.....	56
Educators Holding Positive Beliefs About Play.....	57
Educators Holding Negative Beliefs About Play .....	58
Play-Based Educators Facing External Barriers.....	60
Influence of Teacher Preparation Experiences on Educator Pedagogy.....	63
Summary .....	64
Chapter 3: Methodology .....	65
Bridging Theory and Methods .....	65
Critical Theories .....	67
Community Cultural Wealth Model.....	67
Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy.....	69
Framework of Genishi and Dyson.....	71
Social Development Theories.....	73
Piaget and Vygotsky.....	73
Bronfenbrenner.....	75
Lave and Wenger.....	76
Research Design.....	77
Phenomenological Approach.....	80
Case Study .....	83
Researcher Positionality .....	85
Becoming an Educator.....	86
Shifting Roles and Perspectives.....	88
Returning to the Classroom.....	90
Reflexivity .....	92
Study Context.....	94
Site Selection and Rationale.....	97
Participant Selection and Rationale.....	98
Camille.....	100
Audrey.....	100

Lauren .....	101
Participant Recruitment and Consent .....	101
Data Collection.....	103
Detailed Questionnaire .....	104
Individual Interview .....	105
Focus Group with Collaborative Member Checking.....	107
Data Analysis .....	110
Analyzing Questionnaires, Individual Interviews, and Focus Group Session .....	110
First Cycle: Holistic and Concept Coding Stages.....	111
Second Cycle: Pattern Coding and Theme Emergence. ....	112
Study Rigor .....	114
Validity, Credibility, and Reliability .....	114
Validity. ....	114
Credibility. ....	115
Reliability.....	117
Limitations .....	117
Ethics.....	118
Summary .....	119
Chapter Four: Findings .....	120
Teachers’ Definitions and Perceptions of Play .....	121
Finding 1: Educators Became Advocates for Play Through Their Experiences.....	130
Teacher Education Experiences.....	130
Developing Orientations Through Teacher Induction Experiences .....	132
Orientations Impacted by Others’ Perceptions of Play .....	139
Perceptions of Play by Administration. ....	140
Perceptions of Play by “Outsiders.”.....	145
Finding 2: Educators Were Committed to their Pedagogical Beliefs about Play .....	146
Teachers’ Expression of the Benefits of Play.....	148
Kindergarten as Foundational.....	151
Finding 3: Educators Balanced Honoring Childhood with Kindergarten Expectations .....	154
Valuing Childhood and “Letting Kids be Kids” .....	154
Providing Space and Materials for Play.....	155

Providing Access to Play .....	159
Balancing Expectations .....	160
Summary .....	165
Chapter Five: Discussion .....	166
Discussion of Research Questions and Review of Methodology .....	167
Honoring Childhood and the Culture of Play: The Outermost Circle .....	171
Developing Identities as Teachers of Play: The Mid-Level Circle.....	174
Identifying as Advocates for Play: The Innermost Circle.....	177
Research Implications .....	180
Teacher Education Programs.....	180
School and District Administrators .....	182
Education Policy.....	185
Model of Critical Play Pedagogy .....	187
Recommendations for Further Study .....	190
Critical Reflection on the Examination of Kindergarten Teachers and Play .....	191
Final Thoughts.....	194
References.....	197
Appendix A: Common Core State Standards for Kindergarten for English Language Arts (ELA) .....	230
Appendix B: Common Core State Standards for Kindergarten for Mathematics .....	236
Appendix C: IRB Approval Letter and Amendment Approval .....	239
Appendix D: Detailed Questionnaire with Demographic Form .....	241
Appendix E: Interview Guide .....	243
Appendix F: Context Notes Sheet/Analytic Memo Template .....	245
Appendix G: Focus Group Conversation Guide.....	246
Appendix H: Code Charting Template .....	247
Appendix I: Coding Key Template.....	248

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1	Continuum of Play-Based Learning .....	34
Figure 2	Conceptual Framework of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Levels .....	75
Figure 3	Overview of Research Approach .....	80
Figure 4	Phenomenological Interpretation .....	83
Figure 5	A Trinity of Concepts Venn Diagram .....	113
Figure 6	Codes-to-Findings Visual .....	116
Figure 7	Aspects of Critical Play Pedagogy .....	169
Figure 8	Model of Critical Play Pedagogy .....	188

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1	Types and Benefits of Play .....	36
Table 2	Six Assets Brought to the Classroom by Children of Color .....	68
Table 3	Milner’s (2012b) Typology of Urban Education .....	78
Table 4	Demographics of Districts and Schools .....	96
Table 5	Demographics of Participants .....	99
Table 6	Timeline of Data Collection .....	104
Table 7	Cycles of Data Collection .....	110
Table 8	Participant Definitions and Descriptions of Play .....	121
Table 9	Participants’ Beliefs About Kindergarten and Play .....	123
Table 10	Participants’ Ability to Exercise Autonomy in the Classroom .....	127
Table 11	Perceptions of Classroom Play .....	128
Table 12	Summary of Research Questions and Findings .....	168

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Over the course of this dissertation research journey I have given a lot of thought to the hundreds of learners I have had the privilege of teaching throughout my career. Looking back, I recognize there were times I definitely should have and could have done more to ensure their childhood was honored. While I cannot change the past, I can learn from it, and I commit to always striving to do better.

Throughout my education career, I have had two major professional “bucket list” items I aspired to achieve: attaining National Board Certification and earning a doctorate degree. I am privileged and fortunate to say I have accomplished both. However, I humbly acknowledge I still have so much more to learn.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

*“Play, while it cannot change the external realities of children’s lives, can be a vehicle for children to explore and enjoy their differences and similarities and to create, even for a brief time, a more just world where everyone is an equal and valued participant.”*

- Patricia G. Ramsey, Contemporary American Educational Psychologist

The field of early childhood education has shifted from a space that nurtured a love of learning to “pressure-cooker classrooms” characterized by scripted curricula, one-size-fits-all standards, and relentless testing and assessment practices (Miller & Almon, 2009, p. 15). This transformation of children’s educational environments has been deemed a “crisis” (p. 16) and stems from the demise of play and experiential learning, increases in sedentary work, and developmentally inappropriate testing (Brown et al., 2020; Miller & Almon, 2009; Nicolopoulou, 2010; Pappano, 2010). The “hijacking of kindergarten” has yet to yield long-term outcomes (Miller & Almon, 2009, p. 16) and seems to have been a senseless endeavor, as the push for accountability has resulted in diminished instructional quality and an erosion in equitable teaching and learning practices (Hinnant-Crawford, 2019).

### **Study Background**

The conceptualization of this research study examining the experiences of kindergarten educators and their implementation of play-based learning in urban school classrooms was largely influenced by my experiences as an early childhood educator. I have been employed in a number of schools, described as urban and suburban in context, over the past 14 years. In that time, I have experienced first-hand the oscillation between pedagogical stances promoting highly standardized, regimented programming and philosophies that center child-oriented, personalized learning experiences developed to meet the academic, social, and emotional goals of each

individual child. Every pedagogical shift has touted claims of being considered the most effective practice for early childhood education at that moment in time (Lucas, 2013; Robinson et al., 1998).

Existing scholarship (e.g., Han & Damjanovic, 2014; Rushton & Larkin, 2001; Wood, 2014) emphasizes the significance of young learners having access to developmentally appropriate instruction to respond to diverse backgrounds (i.e., cultural, racial, linguistic) and abilities (i.e., social, emotional, behavioral, physical, cognitive). While policies and standards attempt to provide guidelines for schools, they perpetuate increased demands on educators with the adoption of programs, initiatives, and school/district requirements implemented with goals of improving test scores and increasing accountability and standardization (Bodrova et al., 2013; Guirguis, 2018; Michael-Luna et al., 2019; Miller & Almon, 2009; Nicolopoulou, 2010).

As a result of the accountability orientation, the ability for educators to make instructional decisions and implement creative, meaningful, and purposeful lessons through play have become increasingly restricted in favor of one-size-fits-all instruction (Genishi & Dyson, 2012). This restriction occurs despite research indicating a positive relationship between play and development in early childhood-aged learners (Bongiorno, 2018; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2015; Miller & Almon, 2009; Nicolopoulou, 2010; Rand & Morrow, 2021; Stremmel et al., 2019; Yogman et al., 2018; Zosh et al., 2022), and specifically within urban settings where increased accountability is held as the panacea for augmenting student achievement (Hinnant-Crawford, 2019). A standardized paradigm establishes despairing differences in learning circumstances for children living and learning in urban spaces, characterized by residential, economic, and racial segregation (Nelsen, 2015).

Both preservice and in-service teachers are experiencing the challenges of “teaching young children in public schools where the call for fidelity to curriculum is the answer to achievement gaps and children are deemed as ‘behind’ before they even get a start” (Mueller & Whyte, 2019, p. 73). Early childhood educators have become bounded by scripted programs and prescriptive curricula (Miller & Almon, 2009), feeling pressure to “train successful test takers” (Nicolopoulou, 2010, p. 2).

Tensions exist between what many early childhood educators determine as the true purpose of kindergarten for their learners (i.e., instilling a love of learning, engaging in meaningful learning experiences, developing social and emotional skills) (Brown et al., 2020; Miller & Almon, 2009) and the push for academic preparation and performance through direct instruction (Brown et al., 2020; Miller & Almon, 2009; Nicolopoulou, 2010; Pappano, 2010). Thus, kindergarten has been deemed the new first grade (Bassok et al., 2016; Brown et al., 2020; Miller & Almon, 2009) due to an “alarming increase in didactic instruction” (Miller & Almon, 2009, p. 16) which is characterized by the use of workbooks, worksheets, and textbooks in place of blocks, sand tables, and dramatic play areas.

While movement between pedagogical philosophies and frameworks is common in education (Inouye & Houseal, 2018; Kern, 2011; Slavin, 1989; Throne, 1994), consideration of individual circumstances and responsive instruction for learners can seem like an after-thought for educational decision-makers. Mandates are often forced upon educators by district administrators, school leaders, and policymakers, many of whom are either far removed from the classroom by time and proximity or have never actually worked in the field of education (Allington, 2012).

Reflecting on the numerous shifts that have taken place in education during my time in the field (as both an educator and an instructional leader) has led me to wonder about the pedagogical beliefs of teachers of young children and the agency they feel regarding instructional decisions that directly impact the learners in their classrooms. In my experience, educators are tasked with the implementation of mandates and district initiatives that dictate what they teach, how they teach it, and what outcomes should be attained. Such mandates place pressure on early childhood educators to “move away from rich, holistic social pedagogy to focus on externally imposed taught content... [reproducing] inequalities among previous generations by privileging dominant classes and cultures” (Murray, 2023, p. 3). In response, early childhood educators are seeking to “move beyond a standardized childhood and honor creative, equitable approaches to education and learning,” for if not, “inequities of the past are likely to continue” (Michael-Luna et al., 2019, p. 125).

While educators in suburban and rural school districts are not immune to educational mandates and policy decisions, learning environments situated in urban school settings are particularly vulnerable to the shifts toward standardized instructional practices (Carlsson-Paige, 2020; Miller & Almon, 2009). Deficit mindsets about children and families who reside in urban school districts can influence pedagogical decisions, instructional approaches, and educational policies (Carey et al., 2018; Haberman, 1991; Howard, 2019; Massey et al., 2014). With standardization and accountability looming, the perceptions of teachers around kindergarten pedagogy garnered insight into the current status of play in urban early childhood classrooms.

### **Purpose of Research**

The purpose of this inquiry was to understand the experiences of kindergarten educators in their implementation of play-based learning in urban school settings. This phenomenological

case study utilized a design that embraced a hermeneutic approach, and focused on the lived experiences of educators and their interpretation of the phenomenon of implementing play into their current contexts. A phenomenological, hermeneutic approach involved collaboration between participants and myself, as the researcher, to collectively engage in dialogue leading to the co-construction of the classroom experience.

Through my adoption of a critical lens, the perspectives of the educators as promoters of equitable early childhood educational systems and advocates (i.e., for access to play) guided this research. The ultimate goal of this inquiry was to identify the extent to which educators were able to implement play-based learning, and if faced with barriers, how they were able to overcome them to implement practices of equity and access with their learners. This equity-focused goal centered on the experiences of young children in urban school settings, as the quality of urban education is often hindered by deficit mindsets (Carey et al., 2018; Haberman, 1991; Howard, 2019; Massey et al., 2014) and practices that negatively influence children's access to developmentally appropriate instruction (Miller & Almon, 2009).

### **Research Questions**

This inquiry sought to understand the experiences and pedagogical beliefs of kindergarten educators and their implementation of play-based learning in urban school settings. A qualitative, phenomenological case study was designed and guided the primary research question: What are the experiences of educators regarding the role of play-based learning in urban kindergarten classrooms? This main question was supported by four sub-questions:

1. How do educators define play within a classroom context?
2. What are the pedagogical beliefs of kindergarten educators regarding play-based learning?

3. In what ways, if any, are kindergarten educators incorporating play-based learning experiences into their classrooms and ensuring access to each child?
4. What alignments and/or tensions exist between the pedagogical beliefs of educators regarding play-based learning and the initiatives and directives of the school district in which they are employed?

Keeping these questions at the forefront of this inquiry, I investigated the lived experiences of kindergarten educators and how they navigated the expectations placed on them in an era of increased accountability for young learners within an urban setting situated in the midwestern region of the United States. The questions presented here provided a framework for this study and supported a co-construction of meaning between myself and the educators, as we explored kindergarten play-based learning, specifically in the context of urban classroom environments.

### **Research Significance**

This research is significant because all children should have access to and experience with just and equitable practices that preserve the essence of childhood through play (i.e., inclusive of play-based learning and free time/space with recess) (e.g., Jordan, 2022; London, 2019). Studying kindergarten educators' experiences implementing play-based learning in urban school settings addressed a paucity in current early education and care literature. According to Barblett and colleagues (2019), there is a limited emphasis in existing research that discusses the observations of educators and their views on the current state of play. Educators often have to negotiate their pedagogical beliefs on play with what they are mandated to implement in their classrooms (Bodrova et al., 2013; Fesseha & Pyle, 2016; Guirguis, 2018; Han, 2013; Roberts-

Holmes & Bradbury, 2016). Therefore, gaining teachers' insights on their experiences with and beliefs about play informs the contention educators face on a daily basis.

The significance of this particular inquiry lies in the present status of play in early childhood education. Conversations about play and equitable access to education are not happening within the same circles as conversations about educational policy and what will advance our nation's education system (Brown, 2009; Turner & Spain, 2020; Turner et al., 2013). In this inquiry, I sought to understand if and what barriers existed with regard to implementing play-based learning and to what extent kindergarten educators had autonomy to make decisions about the implementation of play-based learning in their urban classrooms.

Additionally, this topic was particularly significant as educators navigated post-pandemic social distancing and isolation restrictions and committed to resocializing young learners who experienced significant reductions or total elimination of in-person interactions (Larivière-Bastien et al., 2022; London, 2020). Educators' work continues, as they help children cope with and make sense of the intense changes they experienced by incorporating activities, such as imaginative play, which can help children to regain a sense of security (Carlsson-Paige, 2020).

Children gain a number of benefits from interacting with their peers, some of which are fostered through play (Fox & Riconscente, 2008; Guirguis, 2018; Yogman et al., 2018). Socialization aids in the development of regulation of emotions and behaviors, forges connections with others, and builds confidence and responsibility in children (Bowman, 2023). Guiding children in navigating social interactions through the post-COVID era requires intentional promotion and practice in environments that feel safe and nurturing to support their development and emotional well-being (Bowman, 2023; Larivière-Bastien et al., 2022; London, 2020). Since children rely heavily on school and extra-curricular settings to establish and

maintain friendships, incorporating peer interactions into classroom contexts should continue to be prioritized in order to meet their social needs (Larivière-Bastien et al., 2022).

A critical stance facilitated the understanding of how educators navigated their beliefs about play-based learning and approached barriers to incorporating play in their urban kindergarten classrooms. In alignment with Barblett and colleagues' (2019) call to discuss the observations of educators and their views on play, this work will open avenues of conversation about the status of play, equitable access to play, and advocacy for play in childhood learning experiences.

### **Definitions of Terms, Concepts, and Abbreviations**

The following terms, concepts, and abbreviations will be referenced as they are used throughout this study.

**4K/K4:** The abbreviations *4K* and *K4* refer to four-year-old kindergarten, sometimes referred to as preschool. The abbreviations *4K* and *K4* are used interchangeably throughout this study, depending on the term used in individual school settings.

**5K/K5:** The abbreviations *5K* and *K5* refer to five-year-old kindergarten. The abbreviations *5K* and *K5* are used interchangeably throughout this study, depending on the term used in individual school settings.

**Administrator:** An *administrator* is referenced as the person(s) responsible for making decisions about a school or district. At the school building level, this may include principal(s) and assistant/associate principal(s). At the district level, this may include the superintendent and directors (e.g., curriculum and instruction, student services).

**COVID-19:** *COVID-19* is an acronym for the coronavirus disease of 2019, which is caused by the virus, SARS-CoV-2. COVID-19 became a global pandemic in 2020 and has

caused over one million deaths to date in the United States (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023).

***Direct instruction:*** *Direct instruction* is an instructional practice in which the teacher delivers content to students, typically in a traditional, structured manner.

***Direct Instruction (DI):*** *Direct Instruction (DI)* is an instructional model that features highly structured, scripted lessons delivered in a specific, explicit, and sequenced manner.

***Early childhood education:*** In this study, *early childhood education* implies the education of school-aged children, ages 4 through 8. The grade levels typically correlated with these ages are 4K, 5K, 1st grade, and 2nd grade.

***Educator:*** An *educator* is referenced as a teacher responsible for the daily instruction of a classroom of students (learners). The terms *educator* and *teacher* will be used interchangeably throughout this study.

***IRB:*** The abbreviation, *IRB*, stands for the Institutional Review Board, a committee serving at an institution of higher learning, such as a university, to ensure ethical research methods.

***Kindergarten:*** In the context of this study, this term refers specifically to 5K/K5, which is traditionally the year of schooling that occurs before entering 1st grade.

***Learner:*** A *learner* is another word for student, or one who attends school, receives instruction, and is under the supervision of the educator (teacher) while in the classroom setting. The terms *learner* and *student* will be used interchangeably throughout this study.

***Learners of Color, Students of Color, People of Color, Families of Color, Communities of Color:*** In the context of this study, these terms refer to a person or persons living in the United States who identify as Black, Asian, Latina/o, Pacific Islander, Indigenous populations, and

Individuals of Mixed Heritage and do not identify as white. My definition aligns with scholars (Evans et al., 2024; Turner, 2020) and intentional capitalization is used to oppose the historical and ongoing marginalization of individuals and groups of people.

***Phenomenological:*** A *phenomenological* approach is a qualitative research methodology that focuses on the lived experiences of participants and their encounters with a particular phenomenon.

***Play:*** In this study, the term *play* is explored in-depth in Chapter Two. In a general sense, *play* can be described as freely chosen, child-directed activities (Miller & Almon, 2009). These activities are intrinsically motivated and include a variety of types of play, including dramatic play, artistic play, music play, block play, and pretend play.

***Play-based learning:*** *Play-based learning* is a pedagogical practice that places play and learning in mutual support of one another (Zosh et al., 2022). *Play-based learning* provides a context for learning (Bongiorno, 2018) and promotes active learning and engagement (Garvey, 1990; Stremmel et al., 2019; Yogman et al., 2018) by tapping into a child's natural curiosity (Binnendyk, 2022). The term *play-based learning* is further explored in Chapter Two.

***Urban:*** In this study, the term *urban* is used to describe densely populated geographical areas situated within large cities (Ahram et al., 2011; Milner, 2012b; Welsh & Swain, 2020).

***Urban education, urban schools, urban school districts, urban school settings:*** In this study, these terms are used to identify school settings located in urban areas, characterized by the resources available (or unavailable) to schools including experienced teaching staffs (Carter et al., 2017; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Massey et al., 2014; Morales-James et al., 2012; Ripp et al., 2018), physical resources such as textbooks and curricular materials (Ahram et al., 2011; Carter et al., 2017; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Welsh & Swain 2020), condition of facilities (Ahram et

al., 2011; Welsh & Swain, 2020), and funding gaps (Bonds et al., 2009; PGCMLS, 2020). My definition aligns with Milner's (2012a) typology of urban contexts, which he categorizes as *urban intensive*, *urban emergent*, and *urban characteristic* (see Table 3 for full descriptions of each typology).

**White:** This term is intentionally uncapitalized within the study (except where included in a direct quotation) as a means of deemphasizing whiteness and resisting white hegemony (Turner, 2020).

## Summary

Early childhood education has become a standardized, accountability-driven system with increased academic pressures placed on young learners (Bodrova et al., 2013; Carlsson-Paige, 2020; Guirguis, 2018; Michael-Luna et al., 2019; Miller & Almon, 2009; Nicolopoulou, 2010). With a greater emphasis on academic skills at an increasingly earlier age, the *child* has essentially been “lost” in early childhood (Mueller & File, 2019, p. 48). My study examining the experiences of kindergarten educators and their implementation of play-based learning in urban school classrooms sought to cast a light on the current state of the early childhood education system and how pedagogical shifts have impacted young children.

This study is organized into five chapters. The first chapter serves as an introduction and overview of the focus, purpose, and significance of this inquiry. Chapter Two consists of the literature review, which highlights the scholarship and existing literature on the topics of access to play, an overview of play and early childhood education, types and benefits of play, barriers to play, and the pedagogical beliefs of educators. Chapter Three orients the reader with the phenomenological case study approach and outlines the critical theories and social development theories that guided this inquiry. This chapter specifically describes the philosophical

hermeneutic lens and all aspects of the design of this study (setting, participants, data collection, analysis, validity, reliability, and limitations). Chapter Four addresses the findings from this inquiry, as well as organizes and reports the data and conclusions through rich descriptions. The final, fifth chapter offers a discussion and synthesis of the findings. Within the discussion, I explicitly align the findings with the research questions, literature review, and critical and theoretical frameworks that guided the original inquiry. I also discuss implications, suggest recommendations for further or future research, and conclude with a final, overall reflection of the study.

## **Chapter 2: Review of Literature**

While the act of playing is considered a natural occurrence during the childhood years (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016), and by some scholars deemed a “necessity” (Sutapa et al., 2021, p. 1), the reality is that not all children have access to play (Bodrova & Leong, 2015; Carlsson-Paige, 2020; Jarrett et al., 2015; London, 2019). The types and benefits of play are numerous and often described from a white, middle-class, able-bodied position. An examination of the literature illuminates the fact that access to play is limited for some children, especially Children of Color and children living in high-poverty areas (Barros et al., 2009; Jordan, 2022; London, 2019; Turner et al., 2013).

In the examination of educators’ experiences regarding play-based learning in urban kindergarten classrooms, this chapter serves as a synthesis of literature on the topics of access to play, an overview of play and early childhood education, types and benefits of play, barriers to play, and the pedagogical beliefs of educators. As it relates to play and the role of kindergarten in our educational system, a brief history of play-based practices is also included in this review. This review of literature supports the examination of teachers’ experiences with play-based learning and the position that all children deserve access to play in their kindergarten classrooms.

### **Access to Play**

Race, gender, dis/ability, and socioeconomic disparities impact opportunities for play (Jarrett et al., 2015; Jordan, 2022; Macpherson et al., 2010; Rand & Morrow, 2021) and access to quality play spaces throughout the United States (DeMarie, 2010; Jordan, 2022). Perhaps one of the most visible spaces for children in the United States are school playgrounds. These spaces serve schools and often surrounding neighborhoods with places to play, opportunities to socialize with peers, and experiences from which to develop important and lasting skills.

## *School Playgrounds*

The American playground movement, which began in the 1880s (Chudacoff, 2007), stemmed from the need for educational spaces for “very young children of the slums” as a means to “instill immigrant children with ‘American’ middle-class ideals” (p. 76). Sand gardens served as the earliest playgrounds, and eventually, government agencies constructed summer school playgrounds and year-round play areas as alternatives to unsupervised play.

Disparities in school playgrounds are often a reflection of the school systems’ values regarding play (Jarrett et al., 2015) and the socioeconomic status of the surrounding community (Jordan, 2022; Macpherson et al., 2010). In 2015, Jarrett and her graduate students conducted a study of elementary school playgrounds in one Southern U.S. county, taking representative photographs of all outdoor areas of each school including gardens, play equipment, outdoor art, play fields, and nature trails. The graduate students then scored and statistically analyzed all of the pictures. Their results found that the play structures at schools in economically less advantaged neighborhoods could be described as “unimaginative” and appropriate for only very young children. Whereas playgrounds in wealthier communities raised money and thus had “more exciting and challenging play structures” (p. 99).

As an education consultant, Jordan (2022), described visits to early childhood programs and illustrated systemic disparities based on the racial and socioeconomic status of the children served. In an affluent community, outdoor environments were described as “lush” (p. 51) and children had opportunities to roll, climb, paint, and explore. In contrast, a preschool located in a working-class neighborhood, where outdoor time occurred on a shared play structure purchased through family fundraising efforts, was limited to 20 minutes and children were frequently reminded to keep their voices down.

While access to safe and age-appropriate playgrounds is problematic, another concerning trend is the denial of playtime and/or recess as a disciplinary consequence (Fink & Ramstetter, 2018; Jarrett, 2013, 2019; London, 2019; Turner et al., 2013). In surveys completed by 559 elementary schools across the U.S. during the 2019-2020 school year, Tsai and colleagues (2023) found that schools with the highest poverty levels were “significantly less likely” (p. 4) to prohibit the practice of keeping students from participating in recess as a disciplinary practice.

In another study, London (2019) and her research team visited 42 elementary schools between 2009 and 2016. On multiple occasions, recess time was taken away from individual students or entire classes as a result of children’s behavior. In some schools they visited, students were sent to detention rooms during recess periods or forced to sit out of recess and watch the other children play.

London (2019) notes the practice of having students miss recess as a consequence is counterintuitive, as many learners who find it difficult to sit still or stay quiet would benefit from free time to move around and engage with peers. Not only does depriving children of recess deny opportunities to learn a variety of important skills (i.e., social skills and motor development), but this practice of denial is unlikely to promote learning or change behaviors (Jarrett et al., 2015; London, 2019).

Further, denials of play immersed in racial bias have severe consequences in the development of Children of Color, specifically Black boys who are often denied access to recess (Barros et al., 2009; Jarrett, 2013; London, 2019; Turner et al., 2013). This lack of access has been deemed a “social justice issue” (Jarrett, 2013; Jarrett et al., 2015). Jarrett and colleagues (2015) state,

Compared with children who attend schools and live in neighborhoods with greater resources, children in poverty and children from racially underrepresented groups have 1) lower-quality school playgrounds, 2) less time in the daily classroom schedule for recess, and 3) more structured instruction and less playful learning in school from an early age. These patterns of inequity are detrimental to the healthy growth and development of many children. (p. 98)

A lack of access to recess time as well as safe, clean, and inclusive play spaces are social justice issues that continue to perpetuate inequitable, deficit perspectives of young learners.

### ***Time for Play in Schools***

While the physical condition of playgrounds may be a visible indicator of school systems' values regarding play, time for play during the school day inside of classrooms may be more challenging to observe. However, both researchers and educators have noticed that the amount of time children play has declined over the years (Burriss & Burriss, 2011; Carlsson-Paige, 2020; London, 2019; Miller & Almon, 2009; Tsai et al., 2023). Since the 1980s, school districts across the U.S., particularly districts serving large populations of Black children and children from families experiencing poverty, including Atlanta, Chicago, and Baltimore, have drastically reduced, or even eliminated recess altogether (Jarrett et al., 2015; London, 2019). In 1998, the superintendent of Atlanta Public Schools, Benjamin Canada, defended his decisions to eliminate recess by stating, "We are intent on improving academic performance. You don't do that by having kids hanging on the monkey bars" (Johnson, 1998). In Miller and Almon's (2009) analysis of nine studies on the role of play, it was found that play had become a minor activity, or completely eliminated, in favor of teacher-directed instruction in the areas of literacy, math, and test preparation.

Many districts have scaled back the decision to eliminate or reduce recess minutes in recent years (Jarrett, 2013, 2019; Jarrett et al., 2015) and some states even require recesses to be regularly scheduled (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016). However, “unlike the unstructured play of the past, which often lasted for hours and days, playtime in today’s early-childhood classroom is limited and rarely exceeds one or two hours” (Bodrova & Leong, 2015, p. 386). Still, there remains a disparity in access to play, particularly for Children of Color, students attending school in urban settings, and children who come from low-income households (Barros et al., 2009; London, 2019; Tsai et al., 2023), all of whom “have the least access to recess during the school day” (London, 2019, p. 50).

In a study of how kindergarten has changed, Brown and colleagues (2020) conducted five focus group interviews with 13 teachers from Texas and 9 teachers from West Virginia. In the study, participants watched a 23-minute video that featured moments captured over a three-day period in a classroom in Texas. The video followed twenty-one kindergarten students through all of the activities they participated in during those three days from the beginning of the day through dismissal. In total, the class experienced 14 whole group lessons, small reading and math groups, 15 minutes of recess, and 15 minutes of play activities (e.g., Lego, blocks, dramatic play), unless students had unfinished work to complete.

The five focus group interviews asked participants to react to the video, share their beliefs about the purpose of kindergarten, what changes they have witnessed during their careers, and what alterations they would make to kindergarten programming, among other questions. All 22 teachers who participated in the study noted that kindergarten had “changed significantly” over the past twenty years (p. 6) and that the video accurately reflected the current kindergarten experience. Teachers repeatedly mentioned a focus on academics, assessments, and preparing for

future grades, noting the “trickle down” of expectations (p. 7) and the emphasis of being prepared and successful on third grade tests. Teachers shared their frustration, noting that the joy had been taken away from learning and that play no longer happens in kindergarten.

Teachers in the study wished they could better support the development of their students through meaningful lessons and less of a focus on assessments, prompting one participant to ask, “Do policymakers just see kids as test scores?” (p. 8). Participants shared instances where their instructional decisions were questioned by administrators, forcing them to justify activities that did not align with preparation for assessments in future grade levels. While children were able to complete academic tasks, they struggled with social interactions and problem-solving.

When opportunities for play do not occur within the walls of the classroom during the school day, the ability to engage in mature play (i.e., more sophisticated planning), adherence to rules and roles, and the development of self-regulation skills (Bodrova et al., 2013; Bodrova & Leong, 2005; Elkonin, 1977/2005; Leong & Bodrova, 2015), among other important skills, are hindered. Bodrova and Leong (2015) state,

Even five- and six-year-old children, who according to Vygotsky and Elkonin should be at the peak of their play performance, often display signs of immature play that is more typical for toddlers and younger preschoolers—playing only with realistic props, enacting play scenarios that are stereotypical and primitive, and displaying a rather limited repertoire of themes and roles. (p. 384)

Since playtime in early-childhood classrooms is limited and children are often separated by age, young learners not only miss out on opportunities to play, but also lose the benefit of learning from older peers (Bodrova & Leong, 2015).

### *Children's Perceptions of School*

In addition to early childhood educators and researchers, children also notice a decrease in opportunities for play at school. In a study of 156 children and their perceptions of elementary school experiences in Florida, DeMarie (2010) found children's talk, photographs, and pictures selected to represent their points of view varied depending on racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic demographics. The two schools that participated in the study were charter schools located in urban school settings and were given letter grades based on Florida's statewide rating system. Children in the "A"-rated, "successful" school talked more frequently about opportunities for play during the school day as compared to children in similar grades who attended the "F"-rated, or "unsuccessful" school (p. 4).

The children's insights reflected the observations from the researchers, who noted that instruction in the "F"-rated school was focused on drilling facts and completing worksheets, with children working quietly by themselves. Meanwhile, children in the "A"-rated school were often spread out throughout the classroom and hallways and engaged in group work, attended field trips that supported their thematic units, and appeared to have more opportunities to move around and talk freely with their peers. Children at the "F"-rated school also mentioned frequent assessments and evaluations, whereas children who attended the "A"-rated school did not.

In a study conducted by Fink and Ramstetter (2018), semistructured interviews with 17 third and fifth grade students from two schools in western Massachusetts revealed their perceptions of teachers withholding recess as a means of discipline. Their analysis yielded six themes: the importance of recess, the idea of bad behaviors vs. bad kids, understanding why recess was taken away, emotional responses, unchanged behavior, and critical evaluations of teacher decisions. While a number of students shared an understanding of the rationale for

denying a student recess or portions of recess in response to behavior concerns or not completing work, it was noted that withholding recess likely did not change the behaviors of peers who frequently lost access to recess. Additionally, whole class punishments of missing recess for the behavior of one or more students caused critical feelings toward teachers for making such decisions.

The opportunity gaps (Milner, 2012a; London, 2019) young children experience due to lack of access to safe play spaces (Jarrett et al., 2015) and opportunities to engage in play during the school day (Jarrett et al., 2015; Macpherson et al., 2010; Rand & Morrow, 2021) contribute to the educational disparities experienced by Children of Color, students living and learning in urban school districts, and children who come from low-income households (Barros et al., 2009; London, 2019; Tsai et al., 2023). The sections that follow will discuss a general overview of the history of play and kindergarten education, the types and benefits of play and play-based learning, barriers to the implementation and utilization of play-based learning, and the pedagogical beliefs of educators. Collectively, these sections aim to illustrate how a history of inequitable access has shaped the current educational landscape despite abundant research regarding the positive implications and outcomes of play for children.

### **An Overview of Play and Early Childhood Education**

The act of playing in early childhood education, how play was implemented, and who had access to play is largely dependent on the historical context and varies throughout history. There are radical differences in the ways particular groups of children—within families and within communities—experienced play. Contrasting the context by narrating the history of play provides a truthful underpinning of how play has evolved.

Throughout history, children have always had a natural instinct to play, although opportunities for play have largely depended upon socioeconomic status, race, access to leisure time, religion, and adult attitudes toward children (Chudacoff, 2007). Children of all backgrounds were characterized by their inventiveness and improvisation with both materials and spaces (Frost, 2009). While store-bought games and activities were available to those who could afford them, children and families often made their own versions of puzzles, board games, dominoes, and other popular toys. Balls and marbles were particularly popular, and children made slingshots, used planks as sleds, winded balls out of yarn, made their own dolls, and created clothing for fantasy play out of leaves and flowers (Chudacoff, 2007). These informal playthings were not considered a disadvantage, but inspired creativity, as a stick could be used as a horse, knitting needles became swords, clothespins as toy soldiers, and cut up material turned into doll clothes (Chudacoff, 2007). Children utilized whatever spaces they could access including yards, trees, fields, stoops, barns, and wharves, among others, as their makeshift play spaces.

Around the 1830s, the educational value of play and toys were realized and promoted to white middle-class families, touting the use of blocks to teach building skills and playing board games to encourage planning and order (Chudacoff, 2007). Shifting attitudes toward play-based learning tools coincided with campaigns for public, secular education in place of religious education, which also began in the 1830s. Rather than spending their days exploring, children (ages six through fourteen) attended schools for several months each year. However, early public schools were characterized by inconsistent attendance, scarce buildings, and poorly trained teachers.

A comprehensive summary and contrastive analysis of the history of education and implications for young children from all backgrounds is important to consider, especially in understanding the educational landscape and how the past has shaped the current reality. To justly analyze this history requires depth beyond the scope of this literature review. With this current study's focus on urban kindergarten settings, this literature review contextualizes the evolution of play, beginning with the kindergarten movement. The sections that follow outline the development and expansion of kindergarten around the globe, the establishment of public kindergartens within the U.S., and a summary of significant educational decisions and shifts beginning in the Civil Rights era.

### ***The Kindergarten Movement***

In the late 1700s, Johann Pestalozzi, who was later referred to as the “Father of Elementary Education,” established the groundwork for what eventually became known as kindergarten (Moore & Sabo-Risley, 2018). Pestalozzi developed lessons for underserved children in Switzerland and encouraged the use of real objects, particularly those found in nature, to support sensory experiences (Moore & Sabo-Risley, 2018). Later, Pestalozzi would serve as a mentor to Friedrich Froebel (Moore & Sabo-Risley, 2018). Froebel would one day be deemed the “father of modern education” (Baader, 2004, p. 432) and “Father of Kindergarten” (Moore & Sabo-Risley, 2018).

In 1817, Froebel established an elementary school in Germany (Moore & Sabo-Risley, 2018), though it was not until 1839 that he founded the first kindergarten in Germany (Allen, 1988; Moore, 2002; Taylor & Boyer, 2019), which served children ages three through six (Moore, 2002). Froebel aimed to reform preschool education as well as child rearing practices and family structure. He believed that in kindergarten, public virtues of citizenship should be

merged with the private virtues of maternal nurturing (Allen, 1988). With kindergarten school days lasting only 3-4 hours, Froebel aimed to “supplement, rather than to supplant the family” (p. 25) by compromising between home- and institution-centered child rearing. Froebel emphasized the need to celebrate and empower students as individuals (Manning, 2005) and provide opportunities for self-direction, which encourages children to engage in decision-making as well as the ability to pursue interests of choice (Howe, 2016). Ultimately, Froebel aspired to “cultivate the child’s nature rather than coerce it” (Allen, 1988, p. 25).

Froebel promoted singing songs, gathering for circle time, gardening, and engaging in other playful activities (Moore & Sabo-Risley, 2018; Wolfe, 2002). Teachers gave gifts to kindergarteners, which included yarn balls, wooden shapes, graduated blocks, and other open-ended materials for learning (Allen, 1988, 2006; Moore & Sabo-Risley, 2018; Wolfe, 2002). Froebel believed in the importance of training and assigning teaching duties to female teachers due to the nurturing qualities associated with women (Allen, 1988, 2006; Moore & Sabo-Risley, 2018). Froebel would become influential in the training of educators who would establish kindergartens around the world (Moore, 2002).

In 1856, Margarethe Schurz, a student of Froebel’s, founded the first kindergarten in the United States in Watertown, Wisconsin, teaching children in German (Allen, 2006; Baader, 2004; Barbour, 1938; Fleming, 1999; Mackenzie, 1886; Wolfe, 2002). Previously, Schurz had attended lectures given by Friedrich Froebel in Hamburg with her older sister, Bertha (Barbour, 1938; Fleming, 1999). Bertha and her husband established a kindergarten in 1848 in London for German refugees after being forced to leave Hamburg when the revolution failed (Fleming, 1999). Margarethe came to assist her sister in 1851 and in August 1856, Carl Schurz brought his family to Watertown, Wisconsin (Fleming, 1999).

Schurz's small, informal kindergarten (Baader, 2004) originally consisted of four cousins who came daily to play in the Schurz home with their three-year-old daughter (Fleming, 1999). Later, in winter, other relatives and friends asked to join (Barbour, 1938), which prompted Schurz to move her kindergarten to a small building in the center of town, so it was more easily accessible to those who attended (Barbour, 1938; Fleming, 1999). Schurz served as director of the kindergarten until 1858 when the family moved to Milwaukee (Fleming, 1999). The original school continued to operate (although in a different building) until the closure of German-speaking schools during World War I (Fleming, 1999).

In 1859, Schurz met Elizabeth Peabody and shared Froebel's ideas (Fleming, 1999). Peabody ended up studying under Schurz (Fleming, 1999) and in 1860, opened the first American English-language kindergarten in Boston (Cantor, 2013; Mackenzie, 1886; Wolfe, 2002). Peabody is credited with being primarily responsible for the "assimilation of kindergarten into American culture" (Allen, 1988, p. 27). Peabody learned from the Schurz family and in 1867, visited Germany to study with prominent teachers (Allen, 1988). Impressed with their work as kindergarten teachers, Peabody invited Maria Boelte and Emma Marwedel, among others, to come to America to share their expertise (Allen, 2006). Boelte established a training program in New York for kindergarten teachers in 1873 (Allen, 1988) and trained Susan Blow, who set up the first public kindergarten in St. Louis, with superintendent William Harris, that same year (Mackenzie, 1886; Moore & Sabo-Risley, 2018; Wolfe, 2002).

### ***Public Kindergarten Education***

With the work of educators such as Blow, who became known as the "Mother of the Public Kindergarten Movement," (Moore & Sabo-Risley, 2018; Shepley, 2011) public school education eventually spread throughout the United States. By 1880, Blow, who worked to train

teachers including Black women (Aldridge & Christensen, 2013), helped start 58 kindergartens in St. Louis which served more than 9,000 children (Moore & Sabo-Risley, 2018). Public kindergartens, also referred to as free kindergartens (Allen, 1988, 2006; Mackenzie, 1886), became involved in urban reform movements and aimed to support working class families (Allen, 1988). In the U.S., public schools in urban school systems operated “not simply to convey academic knowledge but to integrate the children of diverse ethnic groups into American culture” (Allen, 2006, p. 184).

In 1880, school authorities recommended that kindergarten be part of the Milwaukee public school system, making it one of the first cities in the United States to do so (Barbour, 1938). The introduction of kindergarten to the public school system took “great effort” (p. 26) due to it being a relatively new institution and therefore, not well known or understood. To the public, the benefits did not appear to justify the costs. A trial kindergarten was established in 1880 as a part of the Milwaukee City Normal School. This successful experiment led to a resolution being passed the following spring to make kindergarten part of the public school system (Barbour, 1938).

In other parts of the United States, more schools were being established. However, while early childhood education grew, it did so “along separate color lines” (Cunningham & Osborn, 1979, p. 24). In response, Black communities began establishing their own schools and training programs. In 1883, Lucy Laney, a formerly enslaved woman, established a nursery and day school in the basement of a church in Augusta, Georgia. The school was created for Black children with the aim of supporting working mothers (Britton, 2022; Cunningham & Osborn, 1979). Laney’s school began as a class of six children in the first year and grew to more than 200 children by the end of the second year (Britton, 2022). In the 1890s, the development of Black

women's clubs, often concerned with childcare and education, began to take root, providing kindergartens and childcare centers for Black communities (Cunningham & Osborn, 1979).

In 1896, the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) was established (Cunningham & Osborn, 1979). Mary Church Terrel, the first president, created a kindergarten section and appointed Haydee Campbell, a graduate of Oberlin College, as head of the department. Campbell served as supervising principal of kindergartens in the school system of St. Louis, Missouri. She is credited with the expansion of kindergarten for Black children, not only in the United States, but throughout Canada as well (Cunningham & Osborn, 1979). After the NACW convention in 1896, Anna Murray sought out and obtained federal funds to establish a kindergarten in Washington D.C., perhaps the first instance of federal funding for direct assistance of such a program (Cunningham & Osborn, 1979).

The turn of the century brought with it an increase in public kindergartens. By about 1903, approximately 200,000 children were served by roughly 3,000 public kindergartens in the United States (Cubberly, 1920, as cited in Baader, 2004; Vandewalker, 1918, as cited in Baader, 2004). By 1914, most American urban school systems incorporated public kindergarten classes on a noncompulsory basis (Allen, 1988, 2006). Prior to World War II, kindergarten was a full-day program, dating back to its inception in the late 1800s (DeCicca, 2005). However, the need for labor during the war drew women away from educational roles as teachers and into war-time industries (DeCicca, 2005). In the 1960s, full-day kindergarten reemerged as an intervention to close learning gaps between underprivileged children and their peers (DeCicca, 2005). Otherwise, primarily part-day programs through the 1960s and 1970s served as a transition into school and to provide children opportunities to play and socialize (Votruba-Drzal et al., 2008).

Exploring the origins of kindergarten and the public kindergarten education movement lays the groundwork for this inquiry into the experiences of urban schoolteachers with implementing play-based learning experiences. This exploration is not complete without illuminating significant movements and events over the past 75 years that have shaped the present-day contexts and perpetuated issues of access and equity across time.

### ***A Roadmap to the Current Landscape: Significant Movements in Education***

In 1954, the Supreme Court determined that separation of children according to race was unconstitutional in the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling (Kendi, 2019; Nelsen, 2015; Yosso et al., 2004). This legislation led to the desegregation of schools (Nelsen, 2015), though it was far from a smooth or seamless transition. In an attempt to ban segregation, in many ways, *Brown v. Board of Education* actually perpetuated and expanded the practice. Reforms across the country led to various outcomes, including the removal of Black teachers and principals from their jobs to uphold the positions of white teachers in white schools (Love, 2019).

Prior to the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, all-Black schools were considered pillars of their communities, supported by parents and creating safe spaces of solidarity and opportunities to thrive (Love, 2019). Desegregation mandates were forces of eradication of many schools in Black communities. White flight (Love, 2019; Massey et al., 2014; Nelsen, 2015), based on racist beliefs and attitudes, also occurred as white families opted to move out of their communities for fear of having their children educated by and with People of Color (Love, 2019) or out of fear that the quality of education offered in urban districts was declining (Nelsen, 2015). Busing of students also took place, typically moving “Black bodies from detrimental Black spaces to worthwhile White spaces” (Kendi, 2019, p. 177), breaking up Black

neighborhoods and forcing Children of Color to learn elsewhere (Bonds et al., 2009; Nelsen, 2015).

In 1964, President Johnson declared a “War on Poverty” (Office of Head Start, 2023), leading to the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965 (Paul, 2022). This launched the first incursion of the federal government into public education (Hanna, 2005). ESEA provided funds for primary and secondary education, stressing the need for accountability and high standards (Paul, 2022). The 1970s and part of the 1980s seemed to favor developmentally appropriate instruction (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2015), but a pedagogical shift in the latter part of the century led to more structured, rigid programs. Literacy teaching became very controlled (Mielonen & Paterson, 2009), and play developed a “bad reputation,” as free play and center time were replaced with rigid, scripted curricula (Zosh et al., 2022, p. 7). By the early 2000s, all 50 states developed and adopted standards for grades 3-8 and high school (Costantino-Lane, 2021).

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 aimed to update ESEA and “effectively scaled up the federal role in holding schools accountable for student outcomes” (Klein, 2015, para. 3). With a goal of addressing the “so-called gap” in academic achievement between children from communities with fewer resources as compared to their peers from more advantaged areas (Zosh et al., 2022, p. 7), NCLB replaced opportunities to develop social skills with core curriculum activities (Mielonen & Paterson, 2009). The focus on academic readiness and results led to an increase in structured activities, standards, and accountability (Anderson & Fenty, 2013) in even preschool-aged classrooms, resulting in a decrease in playful learning (Yogman et al., 2018). The adoption of the Common Core State Standards in 2010 by the majority of states led to more demanding expectations for kindergarten, further reducing time for

play (Costantino-Lane, 2021). However, while the standards outline expectations for what children should know and be able to demonstrate, they do not explicitly dictate how teachers should teach (Rand & Morrow, 2021).

In December 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed into law and largely scaled back its regime in regard to educational policy, shifting power to the states (Klein, 2016). While accountability plans, goals, and systems were still required to be in place, states were given autonomy to select long- and short-term goals regarding testing outcomes, graduation rates, and proficiency for English-language, among other areas (Klein, 2016). States were also required to have intervention plans established to support the lowest performing schools and high schools with low graduation rates (Klein, 2016).

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic and the “Safer at Home” emergency orders led to the closure of schools and shift to remote learning with little time to prepare (Hu & Lu, 2020). In addition to being at home for an extended period of time, virtual learning through the use of technology became prevalent. According to Ford and colleagues (2021), while technology use is common in secondary education, it is considered “quite novel” in early education (p. 2). Virtual or distance learning options created numerous obstacles for educators, who faced intensified job demands as well as the stress of facilitating online content and materials while simultaneously navigating new or unfamiliar platforms (Allen et al., 2020; Ford et al., 2021).

In an online survey conducted by Ford and colleagues (2021) in late spring/mid-summer of 2020, of the 1,434 early childhood teachers of children ages 0-5 (including kindergarten) in 46 states, 529 reported teaching virtually at the time of the survey. Most teachers indicated that they had “incredible difficulty” maintaining the attention of children, leading to high levels of stress and anxiety (p. 4). Additionally, teachers reported that children seemed to not understand what

was happening in the virtual sessions, leading Ford and colleagues to suggest that “virtual learning situations may be exacerbating existing inequalities and disparities in learning outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic” (p. 3).

According to Farris and Mohamed (2022), the COVID-19 pandemic “magnified significant racial inequities in schools and society” (p. 112). In mid-August of 2020, school and district decisions to re-open schools and to what extent varied and was often dependent on community spread and recommendations by local health authorities. This led to district administrators attempting to find a balance between the health risks of reopening and continued disruptions in education with sudden closures due to outbreaks.

Racial inequities were also amplified and exacerbated during this time, as school closures resulted in a loss of access to social services in some areas and high-poverty populations and Children of Color were “less likely to have the necessary resources and support needed for remote learning” (Farris & Mohamed, 2022, p. 116). In addition to a lack of or uneven distribution of resources such as technology or materials (Ladson-Billings, 2021), some parents and guardians were given less flexibility to work from home or faced linguistic challenges in supporting their child(ren)’s learning while simultaneously facing concerns over increased exposure to COVID-19 and greater mortality rates (Farris & Mohamed, 2022).

Nearly everyone, but especially children, experienced some degree of social isolation and disruption to routines, extra-curricular activities, and regular interactions during the closure of schools, parks, and other gathering spaces due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Larivière-Bastien et al., 2022; London, 2020). Some children may have experienced a decrease in movement from not engaging in play, leading to decreases in motor development and skills such as balance (Yanovich & Bar-Shalom, 2022). Since play in formal school settings was disrupted or

eradicated in the era of remote learning and social distancing, the inability to connect with peers may have hindered opportunities for young children to learn and develop important social skills (Larivière-Bastien et al., 2022; London, 2020).

Significant events over the past 75 years, including the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, state and federal policy decisions, and the COVID-19 pandemic have influenced the current landscape of education. With these events in mind, exploring play and play-based learning will help to provide context for how the classrooms of young learners shape their experiences and access to education.

### **Play and Play-Based Learning**

In the realm of kindergarten learning, playing is simultaneously considered the “most needed” and also the “most controversial” (Nontell, 2021, p. 283). However, there fails to be a “firm consensus on the definition of ‘play’” (Khalil et al., 2022, p. 1) due to the notion that play is an abstract concept with different meanings and implications for different groups of people (Guirguis, 2018). This definition remains elusive (Yogman et al., 2018), or at best, vaguely defined (Bodrova et al., 2013), despite agreement on the importance of play in early childhood development by researchers and educators in the field (Axelrod, 2015).

Educators grapple with how to label play-based learning situations (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019) and how to define play (Miller & Almon, 2009), as their definitions shape if and how play-based learning experiences occur in their classrooms (Dockett, 2010). Dockett (2010) noted an example of how one teacher provided opportunities for free play only on Friday afternoons, while another teacher shared that students have a choice of which activities they wish to engage in throughout the day. Additionally, the extent to which the educators engaged with the play-based activity varied from teacher to teacher, with some choosing to involve themselves in play

and provide scaffolding for learners, while others were hesitant to intervene, perhaps using the time to attend to other tasks or activities. These examples illustrate the range of definitions and enactments that exist between professionals working within the same field.

Although early childhood scholars struggle to define the term *play* or identify specific characteristics of play (Allee-Herndon et al., 2021), various descriptors of play become apparent through a study of the literature, particularly regarding play's role within school-based contexts. What is sometimes referred to as "playful learning" (Yogman et al., 2018, p. 2; Zosh et al., 2022, p. 6), play-based learning as a pedagogical practice places play and learning in mutual support of one another (Zosh et al., 2022) and is considered a key, developmentally appropriate instructional strategy in early childhood education (Yin et al., 2021).

In the space of, for example, a kindergarten classroom, play serves as a context for learning (Bongiorno, 2018) and promotes active learning and engagement (Garvey, 1990; Stremmel et al., 2019; Yogman et al., 2018) by tapping into the natural curiosity that young learners typically embody (Binnendyk, 2022). Play provides opportunities to cultivate a joy of learning (Yogman et al., 2018) through exploration and experimentation (Edwards, 2017; Nontell, 2021), and encourages the expression of ideas and understandings (Edwards, 2017).

Rather than acting as separate activities, play and learning are closely connected (Bongiorno, 2018), as play can motivate children to learn and support the internalization of more challenging concepts (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Vygotsky (1966/2016) asserts, "It seems to me that from the point of view of development, play is not the predominant form of activity, but is, in a certain sense, the leading line of development in the preschool years" (p. 6). Play facilitates the development and learning of young children (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Zosh et al., 2022) through purposeful (Allee-Herndon et al., 2021; Edwards, 2017; Klenk, 2001), joyful (Yogman

et al., 2018; Zosh et al., 2022) and meaningful (Allee-Herndon et al., 2021; Zosh et al., 2022) experiences while addressing specific learning targets and goals (Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Zosh et al., 2022).

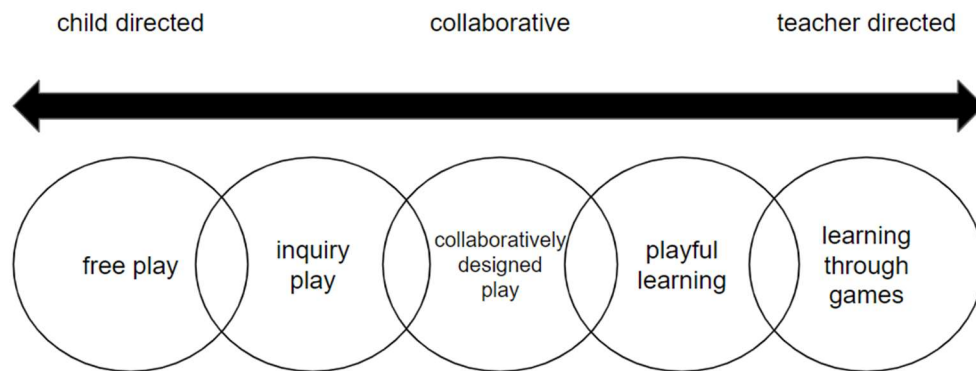
Bongiorno (2018) suggests that one might “think about [learning and play] as a science lecture with a lab—play is a child’s lab” (p. 21). Similarly, Henricks (2020) refers to play as the “laboratory where individuals exercise and refine their abilities to comprehend and manage the world” (p. 126). Rather than viewing learning and play as separate, “antithetical” constructs (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2015, p. 1), one must consider how they work in connection with one another (Bongiorno, 2018; Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2015). This connection provides opportunities for active engagement (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2015; Stremmel et al., 2019; Yogman et al., 2018) for young learners, which can be explored by discussing the types and benefits of play within the context of early childhood classrooms.

### ***Types of Play***

There are a variety of types of play, all of which provide different benefits for young learners (Center for Inclusive Childcare, 2020; Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2015; Zosh et al., 2022). Scholars (Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Zosh et al., 2022) place play-based learning on a continuum, ranging from child directed free play to teacher directed structured games, with teachers acting in a variety of roles depending on the type of play being experienced. Figure 1 illustrates the level of teacher involvement and its relationship to different types of play.

**Figure 1**

*Continuum of Play-Based Learning*



*Note:* From Pyle & Danniels (2017)

Self-directed play, also referred to as child-directed or free play, offers greater learner autonomy as children are able to make decisions about what they play with and how they engage in the play experience (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2015; Yogman et al., 2018; Zosh et al., 2022). During free play, children determine the materials and resources and teachers have little to no involvement in the structure or experience (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Common types of free play experiences are building with blocks, using playdough, and playing with toys such as dinosaurs and cars. While free play is considered “critically important,” it is acknowledged that it may not “provide children with the full learning benefits that emerge through guided play” (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2015, p. 2). In this type of play, teachers may act as an “insider” and “play-mate” (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019, p. 787).

Moving further to the right on the continuum, inquiry play is child-initiated, and the teacher responds to the interests of the child by integrating academic standards that are related to the topic of inquiry (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). By embracing and encouraging a common interest, such as paper airplanes, educators can incorporate books about planes, measurement, and the scientific method.

In the middle of the continuum lies a more scaffolded play type, referred to as guided play (Zosh et al., 2022) or collaboratively designed play (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). In this type of play, the adult honors the child-directedness of the play experience and follows the child's lead as they scaffold the play experience to encourage depth and make learning accessible (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2015). This guidance steers the child toward specific learning goals and outcomes (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2015; Zosh et al., 2022). Since the locus of control is shared, the teachers direct the outcomes by determining the skills to be acquired, but collaborate with learners to determine the theme, materials, and context of the play experience (Pyle & Danniels, 2017).

In the next space to the right on the continuum, playful learning offers a more structured, yet still engaging approach (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Prescribed activities may provide practice with specific concepts, but children contribute ideas and suggestions to enhance the experience. For example, in an observation conducted by Pyle and Danniels (2017) of a classroom in Ontario, Canada, a teacher created a flower shop. Learners were responsible for completing the pre-designed order form with their selections and total cost. Different activities related to the order forms and flower shop operations encouraged the development of literacy and math skills, but learners could request flowers for events they made up on their own, such as a picnic. Flower arrangements were ordered, orders were completed by students who fulfilled roles within the flower shop, and then the picnic event was played out featuring the flowers as a centerpiece.

Structured activities hold their place on the far end of the continuum opposite free play, as they offer less learner autonomy (Zosh et al., 2022). Pyle and Danniels (2017) refer to these activities as learning through games. Structured games aim to meet specific learning goals, but the games provide the scaffolding rather than the adults, as they do in guided play experiences.

For example, a board game that practices numeracy skills would be considered a structured game (Zosh et al., 2022). Structured games are considered the most prescriptive type of play-based learning and aim to promote specific skills and make the learning of required academic content more engaging for students (Pyle & Danniels, 2017).

**Examples of Specific Types of Play.** Within and across the continuum of play exists specific types of play, including music play, art play, dramatic play, block play, play with manipulatives, and sensory play (Center for Inclusive Child Care, 2020). These types of play provide opportunities to practice a variety of concepts and skills within the early childhood classroom.

Table 1 outlines specific types of play and their benefits for young learners. This table offers a succinct overview of each type of play, examples, the benefits learners can experience by engaging in such play. This information is important as we develop an understanding of how play can look in early childhood classrooms.

**Table 1**

*Types and Benefits of Play*

<b>Type of Play</b>	<b>Example(s)</b>	<b>Benefits for Learners</b>
Music Play	singing, exploring instruments, reciting	pattern recognition, rhythm, understanding different types of sounds, opposites, listening skills, cause and effect
Art Play	creating collages, mixing paint, observing an object through senses and then drawing or recreating	naming colors, textures, and shapes; sorting and classifying objects; making predictions; observation; creativity
Dramatic Play	using objects to represent other items (e.g., an empty paper towel roll used as a rocket ship); acting out parts of a	planning, sequencing, storytelling, imagination, identifying theme, concentration, organizing ideas, problem-solving, expressing ideas,

	story; pretending to cook in a kitchen or scan items in a grocery store	symbolic representation, letters/sounds, numbers/quantities, self-expression, understanding of other learners
Block Play	building with blocks (wooden, plastic, etc.)	gravity, balance, cause and effect, characteristics and benefits of different shapes (e.g., which stack better than others), creativity, planning, organization, problem-solving, math concepts (number, order, pattern, etc.), experimentation, observation, comparison
Play with Manipulatives	interlocking blocks (e.g., Lego, magnet tiles, pegs/pegboards)	math readiness (sorting, ordering, identifying patterns, shape recognition, predicting measurement, spatial relationships)
Sensory Play	sand table, water table	scientific concepts (sinking, floating, changes in states of matter), math concepts (measuring, more/less, bigger/smaller, volume), developing and testing hypotheses

*Note:* Adapted from Center for Inclusive Childcare (2020)

The different types of play can exist within and across the continuum that ranges from self-directed, free play to more structured, teacher-directed activities. For example, an art project may be open-ended, with a variety of materials made available to use, but not required, or it may have very specific outcomes that are expected from the participants.

### ***Benefits of Play***

The benefits of play are broad and encompass a wide range of developmental outcomes for learners across several levels of function (Montroy et al., 2016). Specifically, play is attributed to the development of cognitive, emotional, social, physical, and academic skills such as literacy and mathematics (Bodrova & Leong, 2005; Bongiorno, 2018; Epstein, 2014; Mielonen & Paterson, 2009; Montroy et al., 2016; Vogt et al., 2018; Wood, 2014; Yogman et al.,

2018; Zosh et al., 2022). According to scholars (Montroy et al., 2016; Tayler, 2015; Yogman et al., 2018), outcomes such as these are largely affected by the everyday experiences that make up a child's early learning and relationship navigation.

**Executive Function and Self-Regulation.** Play aids in the development of executive functioning (Montroy et al., 2016; Sutterby & Kharod, 2019; Tayler, 2015; Yogman et al., 2018), which is characterized by three dimensions: cognitive flexibility, inhibitory control, and working memory (Carulla et al., 2021; Yogman et al., 2018). Executive function development encourages sustained attention, filters distractions, aids in problem solving, and allows for mental flexibility, all of which contribute to school readiness (Montroy et al., 2016; Sutterby & Kharod, 2019; Yogman et al., 2018).

The development of executive functioning lends itself to self-regulation, which is described as the ability to overcome impulsive behavior (Vygotsky, 1966/2016), manage reactive responses (Bodrova & Leong, 2015; Montroy et al., 2016) and demonstrate “intentional” behavior (Bodrova & Leong, 2005, p. 438), ultimately being in control of one’s thoughts, attention, and actions (Fox & Riconscente, 2008). It is believed that the coupling of inappropriate expectations in early childhood with a decrease in time for play may be “contributing to a rise in anger and aggression in young children, reflected in increasing reports of severe behavior problems” (Miller & Almon, 2009, p. 11) and often resulting in disciplinary action including suspension and expulsion.

According to Vygotsky (1966/2016), engaging in imaginary situations (e.g., imaginary, make-believe, or fantasy play) develops self-regulatory, private speech (Bodrova & Leong, 2005), as the player must align to the roles they are playing and the rules within the context of their imagined situation (Bodrova et al., 2013; Bodrova & Leong, 2015; Mielonen & Paterson,

2009). Aligning to rules and exhibiting appropriate roles during play supports the development of self-regulatory behaviors, further discussed by Elkonin (Bodrova et al., 2013; Elkonin, 1977/2005). Self-regulation is necessary for sustained play, as rules must be followed voluntarily so actions are consistent with the roles being played, meanwhile inhibiting other behaviors that do not align with the role (Bodrova & Leong, 2005; Bodrova et al., 2013).

Children must agree upon and collaborate on the scenario and future actions through planning, which is a feature of mature play (Bodrova et al., 2013; Bodrova & Leong, 2005; Leong & Bodrova, 2015). This planning improves the ability to reason about hypothetical events (Yogman et al., 2018) and increases concentration and determination (Kinard, 2015). As children maintain their role(s) within the context of play (Anderson et al., 2015), they learn to delay instant fulfillment of desires and wishes (Kinard, 2015) by controlling their impulses (Yogman et al., 2018).

**Social Skills.** Social skills are also developed through play-based learning experiences. Such skills include conflict resolution, problem-solving, relationship navigation, collaboration, and self-awareness through various interactions with both peers and adults (Fox & Riconscente, 2008; Yogman et al., 2018). According to Yogman and colleagues (2018), the most “efficient” learning takes place in social contexts with teachers scaffolding the learning through contexts that are meaningful and “resonate with children’s active engagement and previous experiences” (p. 4). When adults scaffold play-based learning activities, children learn how to work in groups, share with others, negotiate, make decisions, problem-solve, and learn and discover their own interests (Jarrett et al., 2015; Schwartz & Luckenbill, 2015; Yogman et al., 2018). Even unsuccessful social interactions provide children with opportunities to develop appropriate

responses and work to understand the intentions and perspectives of others (Bergen, 2002; Fox & Riconscente, 2008; Kinard, 2015; Taylor & Boyer, 2020).

Play can promote more equitable access to learning because it exists outside of ability and background (Taylor & Boyer, 2020) and can serve as an opportunity to practice a variety of skills (Leong & Bodrova, 2015). Nixon and Gutiérrez (2008) argue that English learners especially benefit from play, as play establishes a common ground based on participation in an imaginary world and can change how children see and interact with the world around them. Through play interactions, children are exposed to other languages and life experiences (Souto-Manning, 2006), allowing children to develop and negotiate multiple languages and learn about cultural practices (Axelrod, 2015). Wohlwend (2008) contends, “When literacy and play practices combine, they support and strengthen one another, proliferating ways for children to ‘do school’ and increasing access for diverse learners” (p. 332).

Engaging in art play supports the communication of ideas to others (Anning, 1999). For example, rather than focusing on the quality of a final art project, learners benefit from the experience of engaging in art play through their interactions with others and sharing stories through their artwork (McWilliams et al., 2015). For children who struggle with fine motor skills, adaptations can be made to support participation, such as placing foam curlers around markers and brushes to make them easier to grasp (McWilliams et al., 2015). Play can serve as an avenue for equity conversations by encouraging a child’s natural curiosity about the world around them (Binnendyk, 2022), fostering respect of individual differences (McWilliams et al., 2015), and honoring and appreciating cultural, physical, and intellectual diversity (Axelrod, 2015; Danniels & Pyle, 2022; Epstein, 2014; Yogman et al., 2018).

**Health Benefits.** Play provides a variety of health benefits for participants (Yogman et al., 2018), depending on the type and extent of play. Physically, play supports motor skill development as well as coordination, fitness, and agility (Carlson, 2015; Schwartz & Luckenbill, 2015; Sutapa et al., 2021; Yogman et al., 2018). The hands-on exploration of materials builds hand strength and fine motor skills as children poke, smash, roll, cut, squeeze, and grasp various materials (Schwartz & Luckenbill, 2015). Gross motor development occurs by engaging in activities that encourage balance, object control, and locomotor skills (Sutapa et al., 2021) such as swinging, climbing, sliding, jumping, throwing, and riding (Jarrett et al., 2015). Rough-and-tumble play (also referred to as big body play) is akin to how animals play and encourages children to take risks within specific limits, aids in the development of social skills, establishes boundaries and personal limits, supports the development and practicing of restraint, and can build empathy in participants as they consider how their peers may feel within the context of the interaction (Carlson, 2015; Logue & Harvey, 2009; Yogman et al., 2018).

Engaging in play has also been found to reduce stress in young children (Bongiorno, 2018; Miller & Almon, 2009; Yogman et al., 2018). In a study cited by Yogman and colleagues (2018), preschoolers feeling anxious about starting school were randomly assigned to play with peers for 15 minutes or listen to a teacher read a story. After the intervention, the children who were given the opportunity to play demonstrated a twofold decrease in anxiety.

**Content-Specific Benefits of Play.** The overall benefits of play such as executive function, self-regulation, social competence, and health outcomes support the development of a variety of skills across a number of different functions (e.g. cognitive, social, physical). Play also lends itself to developing an understanding of specific content area skills and competencies such as vocabulary development and language acquisition, literacy skills such as reading and writing,

mathematics, and science and social studies. In the context of specific content areas, it is important to note that when children interact actively with the world around them, they are more likely to remember (Yogman et al., 2018), as they learn best through performance rather than prompt (Mielonen & Paterson, 2009).

***Supporting Literacy Proficiency.*** In the area of literacy, play aids in the development of vocabulary and can support language acquisition (Axelrod, 2015; Mielonen & Paterson, 2009; Miller & Almon, 2009; Nixon & Gutiérrez, 2008; Souto-Manning, 2006; Tayler, 2015; Yogman et al., 2018). Engaging in activities such as playing with blocks, playhouse, and choice time encourages peer interaction and language development (Costantino-Lane, 2021) as well as listening and speaking skills (Fox & Riconscente, 2008). Rand and Morrow (2021) argue,

Play experiences help develop language skills, including vocabulary, decontextualized language, and oral narrative competence; provide opportunities for functional literacy behaviors; and support decoding related skills, especially when carefully planned and scaffolded by an adult who guides the play environment and activities. (p. 245)

When teachers scaffold language practice, children develop an understanding of the symbolic nature of words and relationships between words and objects, leading to metalinguistic awareness and an understanding of written language (Leong & Bodrova, 2015). Play experiences for children with both peers and adults allow participants to “try on new words” (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2015, p. 1) and engage in “role speech,” which is the vocabulary, sentence structure, and intonation needed to act in a specific role (e.g., 911 operator, doctor, vet, customer) (Leong & Bodrova, 2015, p. 34).

Play lends itself to the development of a number of complex literacy skills and leads to competency in reading and writing (Mielonen & Paterson, 2009). For example, literacy centers

promote developmentally appropriate instruction, as children engage in activities such as retelling stories with puppets, noting observations in a science center, or making books in a writing center (Patton & Mercer, 1996). The use of functional print, such as menus, newspapers, and food containers allow a child to see how we are exposed to texts every day and understand the purpose of reading and writing within real-world contexts (Patton & Mercer, 1996).

Experiences such as dramatic play supports cognitive development in children as they begin to encounter abstract, symbolic thought (Bodrova & Leong, 2005). For example, when a child uses a banana as a telephone (Yogman et al., 2018), they are demonstrating different uses for the same object (Leong & Bodrova, 2015). The notion that one item can be another simultaneously translates into future literacy skills, as letters represent sounds which are combined to make words that represent objects and ideas (Anderson et al., 2015). Such symbolic play facilitates a child's knowledge of how sounds and symbols work, including gestures, words, drawings, and written marks, which supports them as they learn increasingly complex symbols as their literacy skills develop (Bodrova & Leong, 2015).

Art play, such as transforming a birthday candle into an eyebrow when constructing a face is another example of an experience that encourages symbolic representation (McWilliams et al., 2015). Creating a face out of objects lends itself toward literacy proficiency because it acts as an "experiential bridge" (p. 79) between the concrete and the symbolic: the real face is a concrete representation while the art symbolizes the real thing, representing iconic symbolization (McWilliams et al., 2015). Symbolic play provides learners with a chance to create and pretend through meaningful experiences, and thoughts that are expressed orally when playing transfers to learning to write and communicating ideas (Mielonen & Paterson, 2009).

*Developing Proficiency in Mathematics.* Play-based learning experiences provide more hands-on, active approaches to learning (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2015; Stremmel et al., 2019; Yogman et al., 2018), which are important to the concept and skill development of young learners in mathematics. Calendar and time concepts relate to 1-to-1 correspondence, consecutive counting, and the understanding of temporal relationships such as days, weeks, and months (Anderson et al., 2015). Block play supports the concepts of spatial and mathematical reasoning (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2015) and encourages the development of skills related to symmetry, shapes, and size (Anderson et al., 2015).

Vogt and colleagues (2018) studied two kindergarten math intervention groups and compared them to a control group. One intervention group was play-based and the second was a training program that focused on comparing quantities, counting, part-and-whole relationships, and number recognition. The two groups demonstrated comparable results with the control group in the pre-test. The results of the intervention showed the play-based group produced “significant learning gains” (p. 598) compared to the control group and marginally significant learning gains stemmed from the training program for children with low levels of competency.

The researchers found it is possible for learning gains to be achieved through guided play (in this case, card and board games which were structured by educators, targeted specific competences, and took place within a specific time frame). Reflections by educators indicated that the training program was beneficial for children who were considered low-competency in their math skills, but the play-based approach supported all children across all levels of competency, was evaluated more positively, and described as more fun and less school-like. The researchers indicated that the play-based approach was “more compatible with educators’ pedagogical beliefs” (Vogt et al., 2018, p. 598).

*Developing Proficiency in Other Subject Areas.* Other subject areas, such as social studies and science, also benefit from play-based learning experiences. According to Epstein (2014), the first forms of social studies instruction occur in early childhood settings, where young children discover how their classroom is connected to the larger community. Here, children begin to understand and appreciate diversity through exposure to language, culture, beliefs, environments, and relationships as they interact with peers, listen to books and stories, take on roles during pretend play, learn about people and situations, and participate in art projects and field trips (Epstein, 2014).

In a study conducted by Carulla and colleagues (2021), twenty children from two Swedish preschools engaged in a series of science activities over the course of fifteen months, beginning when they were about three years old. Using a play-based approach embedding scientific content with everyday activities, the teacher and children actively worked together to partake in activities involving scientific concepts such as dissolving, baking, engaging the senses, disassembly of items (i.e., Lego, salt, and sugar), and states of matter. Over time, the children were able to shift their attention from their own perspective to that of their peers, develop inhibitory control, and engage in social interactions through the context of the science activity.

**Play-Based Learning in Action.** While play provides a strong context for individual, siloed content areas such as literacy, math, social studies, and science, it also provides opportunities to address a number of early learning and content standards simultaneously (Anderson et al., 2015).

For example, Anderson and colleagues (2015) shared a vignette of a play situation that unfolded in an early childhood classroom. In their observation, Ms. Ellison, the preschool

teacher, introduced a basket of stuffed bears to the classroom zoo. Two children, Tyler and Juan, had a difficult time agreeing on where the bears should go in the zoo. Neither of them wanted to keep the bears in the basket, nor did Juan wish to put the bears in the same space as the lions. To work through this dilemma, Tyler and Juan utilized problem-solving skills as they worked to figure out where the bears should go.

When the two children disagreed over the number of days it previously took to build a house out of cereal boxes for the lions, Ms. Ellison suggested they refer to the calendar. On the calendar, they marked the day they began building the lion's cereal box house. Ms. Ellison let the children count the days, even though it took several attempts for the children to agree that it took 43 days. Ms. Ellison scaffolded this experience, as she encouraged the children to use their math skills to solve the problem. In this small moment, Tyler and Juan engaged in practicing previously learned mathematics skills (counting, one-to-one correspondence, calendar concepts of days, weeks, and months) and resolving conflict when they disagreed.

Meanwhile, another student, Megan, announced that there were only eight days of school left, and they would not be able to make a bear's house in time. This led to another discussion as the children decided if they would be able to build another house. In this moment, Megan demonstrated principles of estimation and number concepts as they related to time. The different insights also helped the children consider one another's perspectives and opinions, which Ms. Ellison encouraged them to discuss until she felt the need to intervene. Rather than steer the conversation toward a specific decision, she guided the children's attention to another student by saying, "I wonder what Hyun is building in the block center?" (p. 39). Juan and Tyler asked Hyun what she was building and if the bears could live there. Hyun replied that she was building a bear cave; specifically, the Big Hungry Bear's cave that she recalled from a story Ms. Ellison

had previously read aloud. Since Hyun remembered that bears live in caves, she made sure to build a large enough structure for the bears to fit comfortably, as well as a zookeeper who would need to enter the cave to tend to the bears. In this instance, Hyun demonstrated that one thing can be used to represent another, which will transfer to literacy skills as she learns that letters represent sounds, sounds are combined to make words, and words represent ideas.

Megan pointed out that it was difficult to identify the difference between the lion house and the bear cave. When the children seemed “stumped” (p. 39), Ms. Ellison commented, “I wonder if signs would help?” (p. 39). Megan, who was very interested in writing, went to the writing center and created signs. Three friends joined her to make the signs and soon, they were taped up as labels for different structures. With this interaction, writing and oral language were incorporated into play, and the children also demonstrated responsibility with the variety of materials that were at their disposal. While some signs were spelled accurately and included illustrations, others were accurate sound spellings or used initials only. In making signs, the children had an opportunity to practice language skills, build vocabulary, and experiment with language. The group hung up the signs and announced, “We are the sign makers for the zoo!” (p. 41).

Ms. Ellison gathered the class and facilitated a webbing activity with the different jobs at the zoo. This visual represented the different roles the children might take on while playing and also modeled how letters form words which represent ideas. A conversation was sparked regarding how the animals got their food, and children referred back to their own experiences of visiting the zoo, noting that people fed the animals at specific times. When the conversation involved inaccurate information, Ms. Ellison shared a video on the roles of zoo dieticians and

animal diets. The combination of the information gathered during the conversation and the video helped build new understandings.

Using this information, the children created a zoo kitchen the next day in the home center. Referring back to the video, one child, Austin, convinced Ms. Ellison to allow the use of water in the home center. While Austin respected the rules (boundaries) of the home center, he emphasized the need for a solution to his problem of needing water by talking through his reasoning. Once permission was received, Austin organized the other children to retrieve cups of water, demonstrating one-to-one correspondence as he selected five friends. The children expressed the need to walk slowly if the cups were full, or they could fill it halfway and take two trips. Another student suggested taking two cups and filling them both up halfway. Performing math in this physical, hands-on way encouraged motivation and retention of concepts.

At a later group time, the children decided to create a zoo train out of a cardboard box, painting and decorating it, and adding blocks to serve as chairs. Tickets were made in the writing center with children asking how to write monetary amounts, which Ms. Ellison modeled for them. The children took on a variety of roles, including conductor, ticket-taker, and passengers, acting out their parts appropriately. By demonstrating an understanding of their roles and acting according to the rules of the zoo train (buying a ticket, staying seated) for an extended period of time, the children were exhibiting self-regulation and various social skills as they interacted.

This vignette of a play-based learning experience addressed a number of early learning standards and skills including emotional, social studies, oral language, conflict resolution, writing, mathematics, science, and creative arts. By looking at a play-based learning experience comprehensively, we can see how play folds into the daily instruction and interactions within an early childhood classroom.

While the benefits of play-based learning may lead some scholars to believe that play should serve as the “cornerstone of early childhood education” (Axelrod, 2015, p. 62), an examination of the barriers to implementing play-based learning and the pedagogical beliefs of educators illustrates conflicting feelings regarding the topic of play, despite the numerous benefits that exist.

### **Barriers to the Implementation and Utilization of Play-Based Learning**

In the realm of research centered on play-based learning, scholars have also examined the systems and structures that may exist and serve as barriers to the implementation of play-based learning. According to the literature, learning environments and instructional decisions are largely impacted by a culture of accountability (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016; Guirguis, 2018; Roberts-Holmes & Bradbury, 2016), initiatives that promote standardization (Delaney et al., 2019; hooks, 1994; Howard, 2019; Pinar, 2004), deficit perspectives (Anyon, 1981; Jacobs, 2018; Jones et al., 2021; Valencia, 2010) and a push for academic readiness (Barblett et al., 2016; Dee & Jacob, 2017; Matthis & Trujillo, 2016; Sutterby & Kharod, 2019). These barriers prevent learners from accessing play in their early childhood classrooms.

#### ***Culture of Accountability***

In the current era of increased accountability, measurement and assessment-driven curricular practices (Roberts-Holmes & Bradbury, 2016) have led to a shift from play-based early childhood experiences toward more scripted academic instruction (Ortlieb, 2010). Directed by politicians, standards, and federal programs, there are heightened pressures to improve test scores and meet state and federal criteria, resulting in academic preparations beginning at an earlier age (Guirguis, 2018). Yogman and colleagues (2018) share that early childhood programs are being pressured to add more “didactic components” (p. 1), allocating more time for direct

instruction and the teaching of specific skills, consequently, leaving less time for play (Bergen, 2002; Wood, 2014).

Individuals and entities who make decisions about education tend to believe that schools that are not achieving should require more instructional time focused on academics (Jarrett et al., 2015). Intense academic preparations come at the cost of students having opportunities to engage in play-based experiences (Bassok et al., 2016; Genishi & Dyson, 2012; Nicolopoulou, 2010), especially as some schools have cut recess, physical education, art, and music in order to prepare for testing (Yogman et al., 2018). According to Yogman and colleagues (2018), 30% of kindergartens in the United States no longer have recess due to academic pressures.

This “accountability regime” (Mueller & File, 2019, p. 34) negatively impacts the autonomy of classroom teachers and undermines their professionalism, forcing them into a position to defend and justify their pedagogical beliefs around play-based learning (Barblett et al., 2016; Myck-Wayne, 2010). Wood (2014) attests,

Like a game of tug-of-war, some teachers feel torn between honoring their philosophical grounding in developmentally appropriate practice and play and meeting mandates, closing the learning gap, and demonstrating accountability to administrators and the public at large. (p. 89)

With the stress of accountability systems, many educators are forced to contend with administrators and parents, who may misunderstand or undervalue the extent to which play supports social and cognitive skill development (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016; Nicolopoulou 2010). According to Bergen (2002), the increasing emphasis on accountability corresponds with the decline in the “general understanding of the important contribution that high-quality play – especially pretend play – can make to children’s cognitive development in the early years” (p.

2). Miller and Almon (2009) have deemed the removal of play a “tragedy” (p. 8) for both children and the global community at large, as creativity and innovation are necessary in order to thrive in the 21st century.

With an emphasis on academic outcomes and accountability practices, time to incorporate play-based learning is often pushed aside due to expectations to conform to assessment, reporting, and curriculum implementation requirements (Dockett, 2010), as well as a focus on achievement, enrichment, and homework (Yogman et al., 2018). These expectations are developmentally inappropriate, as children are taught academic content that lies beyond their developmental level and does not actively engage them as learners (Pyle & Danniels, 2017).

### ***Standardization***

With an increased focus on rigor, readiness, and standardization, early childhood education has fallen victim to “datafication” (Roberts-Holmes & Bradbury, 2016, p. 119). Developmentally appropriate instruction is being replaced with lists, scope and sequence documents, prepared materials, and scripted questions (Mueller & File, 2019). Packaged curricular programs assure district administrators of being comprehensive in nature, suggesting a scope and sequence to encourage the building of specific skills and knowledge, and promoting a “lock-step” (Mueller & File, 2019, p. 44) approach toward readiness. Top/down curricular mandates (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019) charge educators with being agents of fidelity with a focus on alignment and siloed by standards (Mueller & File, 2019). Standardized programs fail to consider the needs of the learners in the classrooms, especially since the development of young children is “highly variable and episodic” from the ages of birth through age 8 (Delaney et al., 2019, p. 198). A child’s learning path is uniquely individual and distinct, with their trajectory

being influenced by a number of factors including varying backgrounds and experiences (Carlsson-Paige et al., 2015).

The implementation of a common curriculum with standardized materials and topics promotes rote learning techniques and direct instruction (hooks, 1994; Inouye & Houseal, 2018), closely resembling an assembly-line for attaining information (hooks, 1994). Burney (2015) argues,

The current factory-model school, while seemingly efficient, is in fact grossly inefficient, inappropriate, and ultimately inequitable, as it requires that all students adapt to the mean. Those who do not learn at the speed of the assembly line lose out and/or drop out; those who could learn more do not. (p. 7)

Such a “banking” (Freire, 2000, p. 72) model of education aims to fill students with information as though they are receptacles, with the teacher holding and dispensing all of the knowledge (Goodall, 2017). In this system, it is perceived that “the more completely [the teacher] fills the receptacles, the better teacher she is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are” (Freire, 2005, p. 72).

In regimented educational experiences, learners do not necessarily understand how to become active and engaged learners but rather, learn how to negotiate structures of authority enforced by basic rules and norms (Apple, 2004). Pinar (2004) attests,

In its press for efficiency and standardization, the factory model tends to reduce teachers to automata. In designing and teaching the curriculum in units that presumably “add up” to a logical even disciplinary “whole” (like products on an assembly line), the factory-model school achieves social control at the cost of intelligence, intelligence broadly

understood as including problem solving, critical thinking, and creativity as well as memorization and calculation. (p. 28)

According to File and Mueller (2019), within this “mass standardization project,” children become invisible, resulting in “too many voices unheard and ways of knowing and being untapped” (p. 212).

### ***Deficit Perspectives***

Not only do standardized practices assume universal developmental norms (Michael-Luna et al., 2019), they also promote deficit mindsets, which impact how educational policies are developed and implemented in schools (Massey et al., 2014). A “pedagogy of poverty” (Haberman, 1991, p. 290) creates learning environments characterized by watered down curricula, low standards, and a focus on shortcomings (Howard, 2019). This pedagogical stance implies that families do not care (Milner, 2007) and that children are uninterested in learning and unable to achieve academically (Carey et al., 2018).

Deficit lenses and ideologies are prevalent in schools, and they harm the educational experiences and learning opportunities of Children of Color (Harris, 2012; Jacobs, 2018; Jones et al., 2021). Valencia’s (2010) deficit theory describes how children’s needs are left unmet due to the dominant perspective that does not include all learners. Deficit-minded thinkers and practitioners provide 1) *descriptions* of learners and families, typically through the frame of deficiencies or limitations; 2) *explanations* such as limited intelligence; and 3) *predictions*, which perpetuate the deficits when interventions are not put into place. A fourth aspect is *modification* which seeks to change the behavior by offering a “*prescription* in its approach to dealing with people from targeted populations” (p. 14, emphasis in original).

One example of deficit ideologies was presented by Souto-Manning (2006) in her discussion of how students learning two languages at the same time were seen in a negative light by professionals who drew from outdated research to make such determinations. In another example, Miller (2010) shared a personal reflection on the “if only...” mentality she had as a teacher early in her career. In her reflection, she shared how the parent literacy program continued to reinforce the values of the upper white middle class. Miller ultimately pushed to have teachers learn about the literacy practices of different cultures to better support Students of Color in the classroom.

Deficit perspectives exist in schools and perpetuate dominant views, not only with regard to race, but also social class. For instance, Anyon (1981) conducted a case study of five elementary schools in two New Jersey school districts. Conversations with teachers revealed they held deficit perspectives of the learners attending school in the working-class neighborhood. This was evidenced by comments such as, “they’re lazy” (p. 7) and expecting students to only learn basic skills. When given the opportunity to select instructional resources for social studies, teachers in working class neighborhood schools selected texts that contained less information, fewer opportunities for inquiry-based activities, and promoted the memorization of facts. Notes in the teacher edition pointed out that texts were designed for students who were of “low ability” and considered “educationally deficient” (Follet, 1975, p. 8, as cited in Anyon, 1981).

Deficit perspectives seek to replace practices Children of Color bring from their homes (such as linguistic, cultural, and literate practices) with regimented and homogenized practices (Genishi & Dyson, 2012) that are deemed superior—specifically, white, middle-class norms (Paris, 2012).

## *Academic Readiness*

Despite the positive attributes of play-based learning, once a child enters a formal school setting, play is often pushed aside for more rigid, structured models of instruction with a greater demand on academics and academic readiness (Bodrova et al., 2013; Dee & Jacob, 2017; Flaherty, 2015; Guirguis, 2018; Matthis & Trujillo, 2016; Mueller & File, 2019; Roberts-Holmes & Bradbury, 2016; Sutterby & Kharod, 2019; Yogman et al., 2018), as determined by administrators and policymakers. This increased, societal focus on academic readiness corresponds with the decrease in playful learning experiences (Yogman et al., 2018).

According to Mueller & Whyte (2019), the discourse around “readiness” often drives programming, curricular, and instructional decisions. This concept relates to the desire to “fix” children (Farran, 2011, p. 6), while ignoring the lived experiences, characteristics, and other assets children possess (Yosso, 2005). Labels such as “ready” and “not ready” are being placed on students while focusing on specific, discrete skills taught through marketed, scripted curricula (Mueller & Whyte, 2019, p. 77). Demands for readiness have increased expectations for kindergarten learners, who are deemed “ready” based on rigorous and rigid expectations which have been pushed down from other grade levels (Delaney et al., 2019; Wood, 2014). Delaney and colleagues (2019) state:

Children who do not enter kindergarten ready to begin to read (with letter, phoneme and blend identification knowledge) or do math (counting with one-to-one correspondence and identifying numbers 1 to 10, subitizing up to 4) are labeled as behind and put on improvement plans that often include summer school – *before* kindergarten. (p. 198, emphasis in original)

This “pushdown curriculum” of academic skills has contributed to the “erosion” of play-based learning, which has been replaced with a push for testing, specific skill development, and an emphasis on content (Barblett et al., 2016, p. 38). The focus on content crowds out time for play-based learning experiences which develop a variety of skills, including social competence, self-regulation, and can support positive physical and mental health outcomes, all of which contribute to predictions of long-term outcomes (Bassok et al., 2016).

### **Pedagogical Beliefs of Educators**

Educators hold a number of beliefs about play-based learning (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Sutterby & Kharod, 2019). While some educators believe there are positive aspects of play (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Hunter, 2019), others do not recognize the benefits of play-based learning experiences (Axelrod, 2015; Bassok et al., 2016; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Ortlieb, 2010; Sherwood & Reifel, 2013; Sutterby & Kharod, 2019). Meanwhile, there are also educators who believe in the merits of play-based learning, but struggle to implement such experiences into their classrooms due to outside pressures and barriers (Barblett et al., 2016; Costantino-Lane, 2021; Dockett, 2010; Fesseha & Pyle, 2016; Guirguis, 2018; Han, 2013; Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2015; Hunter, 2019; Klenk, 2001; Mueller & File, 2019; Nontell, 2021; Roberts-Holmes & Bradbury, 2016; Wood, 2014; Yin et al., 2021).

Teacher preparation programs may also play a role in promoting or stifling play-based learning experiences for their students (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016; Jarrett et al., 2015; Khalil et al., 2022; Sutterby & Kharod, 2019) either through coursework or fieldwork experiences with cooperating/supervising teachers. A number of scholars contend that teachers need to advocate for play and be confident in the purpose of play in order to promote equitable learning opportunities for their learners (Costantino-Lane, 2021; Myck-Wayne, 2010; Wood, 2014).

### ***Educators Holding Positive Beliefs About Play***

Studies revealing positive beliefs about play held by educators indicate that play is a natural context for learning (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Hunter, 2019; Nontell, 2021), play supports school readiness (Hunter, 2019), and play encourages the development of social competence (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019), among other important skills. Additionally, the actual implementation of play-based learning seems to be positively influenced by the self-efficacy of teachers and their sense of trust in their principal and colleagues (Yin et al., 2021).

Bubikova-Moan and colleagues (2019) conducted a qualitative meta-synthesis of empirical studies that were published after 1995 and up to November 2018 that focused on teacher views of play-based learning or connections between play and learning. These studies employed interviews, observations, and questionnaires as their method of collecting information. They specifically looked at studies that probed early childhood practitioners' understanding of play-based learning in the context of kindergarten and preschool/early years. The researchers analyzed 62 studies representing 24 countries. Findings indicated that “many” (p. 785) teachers reported that learning can occur naturally through play, “many” (p. 785) deemed that play supports development and serves as a foundation for future learning, and specifically, free play is linked to opportunities for developing social skills such as interacting with others.

In an anonymous Facebook survey of early childhood teachers in New Zealand conducted by Hunter (2019), the 30 teachers who taught Years 0-2 and completed the survey shared a variety of views about play-based learning. Of those surveyed, 96% were in favor of the implementation of play-based learning in the primary grades. Narrative responses from participants indicated that play-based learning not only made their students happy, but also

helped them to learn concepts more quickly and allowed teachers to better meet the individual developmental needs of each learner.

The extent to which educators demonstrate self-efficacy in the area of play-based learning has been shown to have an impact on willingness to implement play-based learning in their classrooms (Sutterby & Kharod, 2019; Yin et al., 2021) and engage in playful practice (Sutterby & Kharod, 2019). Yin and colleagues (2021) studied 542 teachers from 40 kindergartens in Hong Kong in 2018 who participated in a project designed to support the capacity of teachers to implement play-based learning. This was attempted through the development of teacher networks and the utilization of professional learning communities. The researchers found that instructional leadership by principals and collegial trust among educators enhanced intentions to implement play-based learning. According to Yin and colleagues (2021), kindergarten principals contributed to a major organizational factor of promoting and ensuring a trustful culture where instructional changes were supported. Related to this trustful culture was a sense of trust among colleagues, as teachers felt safe sharing their experiences and mutually supporting one another as they worked to improve and inform their practices. This trust lent itself to the development of self-efficacy in teachers, which the researchers found to have a positive effect on the intentions of teachers to implement play-based learning in their classrooms.

### ***Educators Holding Negative Beliefs About Play***

While there are educators who hold positive beliefs about the social, emotional, and academic outcomes play-based learning can support (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Hunter, 2019), some educators have difficulty seeing the value of play (Axelrod, 2015; Ortlieb, 2010). Specifically, there are educators who believe that play-based learning is inessential (Sherwood & Reifel, 2013), unproductive (Ortlieb, 2010), ineffective (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019), or inferior

to non-play-based learning contexts (Sherwood & Reifel, 2013). Play is considered subjective by some educators, as it can be difficult to assess and there are no clear, physical products created (Ortlieb, 2010; Sutterby & Kharod, 2019). Others may struggle to deem play valuable since it “does not lend itself to the narrow measures used to gauge academic development” (Axelrod, 2015, p. 59).

A study conducted by Bassok and colleagues (2016) indicated the changing nature of expectations for public school kindergarten. Their research found that when compared to teachers in 1998, kindergarten teachers employed in public schools in 2010 were “far more likely” (p. 14) to believe instruction in academic content should begin sooner than kindergarten. The teachers in 2010 were also twice as likely to hold an expectation that kindergarteners should leave at the end of the year knowing how to read. This expectation aligns with increases in time allotted for subjects such as literacy and math, which were previously considered “outside the scope of kindergarten” (p. 14). Additionally, teachers in 2010 less frequently reported the inclusion of activity centers (e.g., art center, water table, dramatic play area) in their classrooms while sharing an increased use of textbooks, worksheets, and standardized tests. According to Bassok and colleagues (2016), “although changes to kindergarten classrooms were pervasive, in many cases they were more pronounced among schools serving high percentages of low-income and non-White children, particularly with respect to teacher expectations and didactic instruction” (p. 14).

In the field of education, teachers hold both positive and negative opinions regarding the role and place for play in the classroom environment. However, there are also educators who wish to exhibit autonomy in instructional decisions but encounter a variety of roadblocks to making such shifts in their classroom practices.

### *Play-Based Educators Facing External Barriers*

Research indicates there are a number of educators who wish to utilize and incorporate play-based learning experiences in their classrooms but face a variety of barriers that hinder their ability to do so. Barriers include a lack of understanding about the merits of play by colleagues, administrators, and/or parents (Barblett et al., 2016; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Fesseha & Pyle, 2016; Hunter, 2019; Miller & Almon, 2009; Sutterby & Kharod, 2019) and a lack of resources available for classroom teachers including time (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016; Miller & Almon, 2009), materials, and personnel (Hunter, 2019). In a study of 101 elementary school teachers in Ontario, Canada, Fesseha and Pyle (2016) found that 47% cited time as a moderate to extreme challenge that impeded the ability to implement play-based learning in their classrooms. Specifically, participants cited curricular expectations in academic areas as limiting opportunities to dedicate time for open-ended play.

According to Bubikova-Moan and colleagues (2019) and Hunter (2019), some educators do not feel comfortable implementing play-based learning due to inexperience or a lack of understanding on the topic of play. Ongoing professional development opportunities for teachers would aid in building understanding of play-based learning, teacher roles during play experiences, and benefits of play (Hunter, 2019).

At times, educators are forced to find a balance between their own personal beliefs and pedagogies around play as a medium for experiential learning (Bodrova et al., 2013; Fesseha & Pyle, 2016; Guirguis, 2018; Han, 2013; Roberts-Holmes & Bradbury, 2016) and the expectations brought forth by administrators. Barblett and colleagues (2016) held a forum where they discussed issues and concerns related to pedagogy in early childhood education. Their 200 participants represented a variety of educational settings throughout Western Australia, including

public schools, independent schools, community kindergartens, and childcare settings, including family day cares. Through 14 small focus groups, the researchers asked each group the following question: “What is your most concerning pedagogical issue in early childhood education?” While a variety of concerns were shared, two main issues were echoed throughout all 14 groups. These concerns were reasons for the erosion of play and consequences for the erosion of play in early childhood.

The first issue, reasons for the erosion of play, was attributed to the “pushdown curriculum” (Barblett et al., 2016, p. 38), a focus on assessment results, and an emphasis on more formalized structure (e.g., educator-directed and skill-based activities). Participants felt that play should be engaged in on a daily basis and there was concern from teachers who were unable to provide opportunities for play. One participant, who noticed her kindergarteners were beginning to get unruly during a structured PowerPoint literacy lesson, shared how emotional she felt upon hearing children’s laughter when she gave them time to play.

Other reasons for the erosion of play included the notion that play was misunderstood and undervalued by both educational colleagues and those in leadership positions. Participants shared directives they received from principals that discouraged play-based learning. These directives contradicted the educators’ pedagogical beliefs about how young children should be taught. Some educators who attempted to advocate for play-based learning were reprimanded, ignored, or forced to move into different teaching assignments, while others felt exhausted by the constant need to justify play. According to the participants in this study, there were a number of consequences of the erosion of play, including behavioral problems as well as children not understanding how to play due to the limited time to engage in play at home and at school.

Many educators, such as those in the study conducted by Barblett and colleagues (2016), seem to believe in the value of play, but are confined to the culture and expectations of their schools which demand more traditional approaches to instruction. In a study conducted by Costantino-Lane (2021), while there were participants who found it “preposterous” (p. 244) to teach reading before the adequate development of oral language in kindergarteners, many stated that they would likely teach reading anyway due to pressures from administrators and other district professionals, such as directors and superintendents, to adhere to standards-based instruction.

As a teacher, Nontell (2021) felt kindergarten was “where play was most needed and [was] the most controversial” (p. 283). Nontell likened play-based learning to wildflowers growing naturally, as play fostered curiosity and encouraged rich dialogue, creativity, agency, and discovery. However, Nontell’s vision for kindergarten was deemed unacceptable, with demands in place for children to be seated in one spot, attention focused, with particular ways of doing things, such as holding a pencil, expected and enforced. Nontell (2021), shared,

I could not help but feel our class needed these constraints because of how constrained I felt, as their teacher, with pressure to deliver the curriculum and follow suit with the cover story of our school. Any type of play and exploration seemed to be viewed as a reward after the “real work” was done and, even then, students were limited in what and how they could play with the materials. My classroom seemed both loud with frustrated, constrained children who were desperate to fulfill their own natural curiosities, and quiet, with children waiting to be told how to behave, what to do, and what to learn. Was I becoming the teacher that I vowed not to be? Had my own story been altered to meet the

stories of others around me? Was I changing my students' perception of what school entailed, and what they were capable of? (p. 283)

When teachers hold pedagogical beliefs that support play while working in schools that demand otherwise, they are forced into a “push and pull” (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2015, p. 2) of philosophical positions.

### ***Influence of Teacher Preparation Experiences on Educator Pedagogy***

Teacher preparation programs such as those offered through colleges and universities may contribute to the pedagogical beliefs of educators regarding play. Attitudes and abilities of educators may have a role in the decline of play, as teacher training programs may not have instilled the preparation, confidence, or knowledge to incorporate play into their classroom settings (Howard, 2010).

In a study conducted by Khalil and colleagues (2022), of the 36 teacher educators from 4 universities who completed the online survey, 88% had heard of play-based learning and 53% shared that they include play-based learning approaches in their lectures. In-depth interviews with 17 participants revealed feelings of “insufficient knowledge due to a lack of professional development in play-based learning among teacher educators” (p. 11). While all had experience teaching in classroom settings, participants reported they either did not have specialized coursework on the topic of play-based learning in continued education (e.g., master's or PhD programs) or professional development specifically focused on the topic of play-based learning. While the universities supported teacher educators in the implementation of play-based learning, traditional methods were still a dominant teaching technique. Khalil and colleagues found teacher educators were motivated to share ideas with university colleagues and implement play-

based learning, but felt limited by challenges of social cues, cultural norms, and physical challenges in their application, including logistical needs such as time, materials, and space.

While educators hold a variety of pedagogical beliefs regarding play, influences such as administrator support, parent perspectives, and teacher efficacy can impact their ability to incorporate play-based learning practices in their classrooms. In addition to these influences, systemic barriers including accountability systems, standardization, deficit perspectives, and an emphasis on readiness can impede the utilization of play-based learning experiences in the classrooms of young children.

### **Summary**

This review of existing literature provided a grounding for and a synthesis of the literature in relation to the topic of implementing play-based learning in urban kindergarten classrooms. The current and relevant scholarship in this area indicates a number of barriers to accessing and implementing play despite the various types and benefits of play for young learners. The range of pedagogical beliefs of educators highlights an array of stances that may also impede the implementation of hands-on and engaging instructional practices. However, a gap in the literature exists in detailing the observations and viewpoints of educators on the current status of play in early childhood classrooms, specifically defining the status of play and the issues of access and equity. This inquiry strives to contribute to the literature by exploring the realities of educators and their attempts to implement play-based learning in urban kindergarten environments.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

The research design of this inquiry on play-based learning experiences in urban kindergarten classrooms will be described in this chapter. This study utilized a phenomenological case study approach, specifically through the lenses of critical development theory and social development theory. A detailed description of the research design, as well as the context, selection of sites and participants, data collection and analysis techniques, rigor, limitations, and ethical considerations are included in this section.

This inquiry was guided by the primary research question: What are the experiences of educators regarding the role of play-based learning in urban kindergarten classrooms? The following research sub-questions were also investigated: a) How do educators define play within a classroom context?; b) What are the pedagogical beliefs of kindergarten educators regarding play-based learning?; c) In what ways, if any, are kindergarten educators incorporating play-based learning experiences into their classrooms and ensuring access to each child?; and d) What alignments and/or tensions exist between the pedagogical beliefs of educators regarding play-based learning and the initiatives and directives of the school district in which they are employed? These questions were the grounding for this phenomenological case study.

#### **Bridging Theory and Methods**

In qualitative research, such as this inquiry into the experiences of kindergarten teachers implementing play-based learning in urban school settings, the theoretical lens aims to provide “an overall orienting lens that is used to study questions of gender, class, and race (or other issues of marginalized groups).” The orienting lens essentially becomes an “advocacy perspective that shapes the types of questions asked, informs how data are collected and analyzed, and provides a call for action or change” (Creswell, 2014, p. 297).

The study design for this research was guided by the lenses of critical theories, specifically Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model, Paris's (2012) culturally sustaining pedagogy, and the framework of Genishi and Dyson (2012). Critical theories (Genishi & Dyson, 2012; Paris; 2012; Yosso, 2005) grounded this research as a lens to examine how educators make decisions as to what they honor or discourage in their classroom environments. Specifically, educators have the ability to establish classroom cultures that honor the lived experiences of the children represented in their classrooms. Alternatively, an educator may establish a classroom culture that perpetuates systemic inequities that disregard personal histories or sociocultural forces by ignoring the life circumstances that shape a child's worldview through identities of race, culture, ethnicity, gender, language, and other identifying factors and intersections.

I also draw from social development theories, specifically Piaget's (1962) constructivist learning theory, Vygotsky's (1978) socio-developmental theory, also referred to as sociocultural theory (Mcleod, 2023), Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1974), and Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning theory. The social development theories (Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978) describe and explain play from an early childhood stance and recognize the link between social factors and child development. While these social developmental theories honor findings about play from foundational scholars who have provided valuable contributions to the field of early childhood education research, these frameworks are insufficient, as they primarily reflect white, mainstream perspectives.

The combined theoretical framework of critical theories and social development theories guided the commitment of this study to center the experiences of all children through an equity-oriented perspective by considering who does and who does not have access to play, the rationale

behind instructional decisions regarding play, and whose knowledge is considered valuable in the early childhood classroom.

### ***Critical Theories***

For this study, I drew from critical theories (Genishi & Dyson, 2012; Paris, 2012; Yosso, 2005) which provided necessary, critical lenses to my research questions. According to Ryan and Grieshaber (2004), “Critical theories examine the power relationships operating in classroom relations, enabling teachers to make sense of the ways their practices can contribute to unequal opportunities for students” (p. 45). Critical theories, described here, were a match for this study of play in urban kindergarten settings because, as Jordan (2022) states, “All children have a right to play... Play-centered advocacy must dismantle oppressive educational systems that deny access to play based on race and class” (p. 51).

Educators who are equity-oriented prioritize inclusionary practices to honor and value the lived experiences of each learner. To support this stance, I specifically draw from the frameworks of Yosso (2005), Paris (2012), and Genishi and Dyson (2012). These perspectives offer counter-narratives to conventional pedagogies that promote white norms and middle-class standards that continue to marginalize and exclude groups of children from equitable and just educational experiences.

**Community Cultural Wealth Model.** Yosso’s (2005) community cultural wealth model offers a counter-narrative to the deficit perspectives that pervade schools (García and Guerra, 2004). The community cultural wealth model outlines six assets that Children of Color bring to the classroom. These assets are aspirational capital, linguistic capital, familial capital, social capital, navigational capital, and resistant capital. The six assets, a brief description, and how

they relate to the lived experiences of Learners of Color, their Families, and their Communities are outlined in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Six Assets Brought to the Classroom by Children of Color*

<b>Asset</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Relation to Context Outside of School</b>
Aspirational Capital	hopes and dreams; resilience in overcoming barriers; looking beyond current circumstances	“Culture of possibility” (Yosso, 2005, p. 78) where occupational status of parents is not linked to a child’s future academic potential
Linguistic Capital	communication experiences that encapsulate multiple languages/styles; intellectual and social skills; honors storytelling tradition	cross-cultural awareness; communication through a variety of mediums (visual art, poetry, music) and for different audiences (Yosso, 2005)
Familial Capital	cultural knowledge, community well-being, kinship, connection with others	Funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992); extended family and relationships within and between families (Yosso, 2005)
Social Capital	networks (people and community) resources; social contacts; support with navigating societal institutions	cycle of attaining (education, employment, health care, etc.) and giving back through institutions to social networks (Yosso, 2005)
Navigational Capital	navigating social institutions such as higher education; individual agency coupled with social networks	navigating different roles in different spaces (Ahram et al., 2011); resilience to navigate through constraints and structures of inequity (Yosso, 2005)
Resistant Capital	challenging and resistant to oppressive structures of inequality, racism, patriarchy, and capitalism	transformation of schooling conditions; building of cultural knowledge; conscious instruction to challenge the status quo (Yosso, 2005)

*Note:* Adapted from Yosso (2005).

I drew from the community cultural wealth model (Yosso, 2005) because these forms of capital tap into the knowledge that Learners of Color bring with them into the classroom each day. This knowledge is acquired through an educator's experiences and interactions with the families and communities of each learner in their classroom.

As I examined the experiences educators have with play in urban kindergarten classrooms, I sought to understand if and how educators recognize, celebrate, and honor the assets learners embody when they enter the classroom doors.

**Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy.** Culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) (Paris, 2012; Paris, 2016) embraces teaching and learning practices that “take dynamic cultural and linguistic dexterity as a necessary good, and sees the outcome of learning as additive, rather than subtractive, as remaining whole rather than framed as broken, as critically enriching strengths rather than replacing deficits” (Paris, 2016, p. 6). Culturally sustaining pedagogy extends beyond culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2002, 2010).

According to Ladson-Billings (1995), culturally relevant pedagogy is situated on three components: 1) student learning (experiencing success academically through the development of skills by meeting academic needs); 2) cultural competence (maintaining cultural integrity, utilizing culture as an avenue for learning); and 3) critical consciousness (ability to critique and challenge the status quo, norms, and values that promote and perpetuate inequities).

Additionally, culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2002) is characterized by five elements: 1) the development and acquisition of a knowledge base around ethnic and cultural diversity; 2) designing and including content that accurately represents groups and does not promote stereotypes or perpetuate power structures; 3) demonstrating caring and the building of

a learning community through action oriented partnerships and a genuine belief in the learning potential of students; 4) cross cultural communication that accommodate the communication styles and cultural values of Learners of Color and their families; and 5) being responsive to diversity by aligning instructional techniques to learning styles and preferences of each learner.

Paris (2012) expanded upon culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2002) with culturally sustaining pedagogy, which encapsulates practices that encourage, promote, and sustain literal, linguistic, and cultural ways of being of Learners of Color, their families, and their communities. Paris (2012) states,

I offer the term *culturally sustaining pedagogy* as an alternative that I believe embodies some of the best past and present research and practice in the resource pedagogy tradition and as a term that supports the value of our multiethnic and multilingual present and future. The term *culturally sustaining* requires that our pedagogies be more than responsive of or relevant to the cultural experiences and practices of young people. (p. 95)

Using culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2002) as a foundation, Paris's (2012) culturally sustaining pedagogy respectfully builds upon the important work of these scholars and aims to sustain and expand upon their scholarship.

Culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012, 2016) relates to Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model because it counters deficit perspectives through asset-based pedagogy. According to Paris (2016), CSP works "against the backdrop of beliefs in White superiority and the systemic racism they engender, to prove that our practices and ways of being as students and communities of color are legitimate and should be included meaningfully in classroom learning"

(p. 6). I drew from culturally sustaining pedagogy for this study because of the emphasis this perspective has on encouraging, promoting, and sustaining the literal, linguistic, and cultural ways of being of Learners of Color, families, and communities.

**Framework of Genishi and Dyson.** For this inquiry on play-based learning, I also drew from the scholarship of Genishi and Dyson (2012). The authors centered discussion on the disconnect between the backgrounds of Children of Color and classroom practices that are regimented and homogenized. Their stance came in response to Obama’s 2009 “Race to the Top” (U.S. Department of Education, 2009) initiative, which offered incentives to states who answered the call for higher educational standards, improved teacher effectiveness and student outcomes, increased graduation rates, and the implementation of “ambitious plans” (p. 2). These incentives supported four areas of K-12 education reform: adoption of rigorous standards and assessments; establishment of data systems aimed at monitoring the growth and success of students and inform instruction for teachers and administrators; transform educator and principal effectiveness; and improve achievement in low-performing schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

As scholars in the area of language and literacy, Genishi and Dyson (2012) noted their observations and argued against the standardization and accountability practices the Race to the Top initiative provoked, asserting,

There is a stunning disconnect between the diversity of schoolchildren, especially in cities around the globe, and the regimentation and homogenization of classroom practices, from prekindergarten forward. We are struck by the growing number of prekindergartens where teachers use worksheets to teach early literacy and math, as they try to respond to parental and societal pressure to “educate.” (p. 18)

Genishi and Dyson discuss feeling “dejected” by kindergarten classrooms that have posted schedules featuring 90-minute “literacy” blocks, with concepts typically instructed through prolonged periods of seat-work that neglect opportunities for play entirely. They state,

We feel defeated by the “basics” of primary-grade children, which pull written language conventions, like letter names and sounds, from their intention-driven communicative use to sterile lists of hierarchically organized skills. We are, finally, despondent about the conditions of children and childhood in classrooms where every teacher shares the curricular stage with a monitor, perhaps an invisible expert in surveillance. This is someone who keeps time with a stopwatch and checks to see that mandated, sometimes scripted, language and/or literacy curricula are being enacted with an acceptable level of fidelity to a published script. (p. 18)

Genishi and Dyson (2012) urge that in place of accountability for educators to what is deemed the “narrow ‘top’” (p. 20), they should, rather, be accountable to the growth and development of their students in a sense that is more comparable to a dance than a race. In such a dance, the educator is tasked with sometimes responding, other times leading, and at times, even letting go to observe, which allows them to meet the needs of the individual learners in their classrooms.

I drew from Genishi and Dyson’s (2012) scholarship for this inquiry on educators’ experiences with play-based learning in urban kindergarten classrooms because of their stance against homogenized classroom practices that fail to honor the identities, needs, and strengths of individual learners.

Play-based learning can provide open-ended opportunities for learners from diverse backgrounds to learn from one another, engage in shared experiences, and promote respectful

curiosity and access to learning (Binnendyk, 2022; Nixon & Gutiérrez, 2008; Wohlwend, 2008). Through the lens of my research questions, the critical theories helped me examine the extent to which kindergarten educators working in urban school environments were able to implement play-based learning into their instructional practices, what their views were on such practices, and identify barriers they contended with regarding the implementation of play in their urban classroom environments.

### ***Social Development Theories***

Mainstream social development theorists (Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978) provide foundational research to help educators better understand the broad underpinnings of play and how such experiences support young children as they develop life-long skills. The field of education has long relied on the foundational research of scholars and their valuable contributions, though they have largely described white, mainstream perspectives of the educational experience.

My approach to social development merges aspects of Piaget's constructivist learning theory (1962), Vygotsky's (1978) socio-developmental theory, and sociocultural theories including Bronfenbrenner's (1974) ecological systems theory and Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning theory. These theories are rooted in play and encourage social interactions between child and child as well as child and teacher.

**Piaget and Vygotsky.** In Piaget's constructivist theory (1962), play is emphasized and described as necessary for cognitive growth and development (Taylor & Boyer, 2020). In the constructivist paradigm, based on Piaget's theory of cognitive development, concepts are acquired through active involvement as well as exploration and interaction with their environment (Piaget, 1962; Taylor & Boyer, 2020). In conducting research on play-based

learning in urban kindergarten classrooms, I aligned with Piaget's stance that a child's natural curiosity encourages wonder and problem-solving, and that play can serve as an avenue for learning (Mooney, 2013). This is due to the notion that activity is viewed as an essential aspect of the learning process (Muelle, 2013).

In my analysis of Piaget's theory and the data from this study, an aspect I did not align with as it related to my research was his stance that we learn in biological, linear stages. Rather, I positioned myself more to Vygotsky's (1978) beliefs that our social and cultural circumstances and experiences lead us to individually develop necessary skills. In Vygotsky's socio-developmental theory of learning, the classroom context and social interactions are important and influence student learning (Pyle & DeLuca, 2017; Taylor & Boyer, 2020). Vygotsky's stance on the development/learning relationship is that learning leads development and is an inherently social activity, with developmental progress being attained through interactions between children and those who possess more capable skills (Hatch, 2019).

Learning as a social enactment is where I identified the connection between social developmental theorists and critical scholars such as Genishi and Dyson (2012). The connection emerged due to the idea that interactions between children foster their learning and development. However these opportunities are often stifled by standardization (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; File & Mueller, 2019; Roberts-Holmes & Bradbury, 2016), accountability practices (Bodrova et al., 2013; Guirguis, 2018; Michael-Luna et al., 2019; Miller & Almon, 2009; Nicolopoulou, 2010), deficit perspectives (Harris, 2012; Jacobs, 2018; Jones et al., 2021), and an emphasis on readiness (Dee & Jacob, 2017; Flaherty, 2015; Matthis & Trujillo, 2016; Yogman et al., 2018).

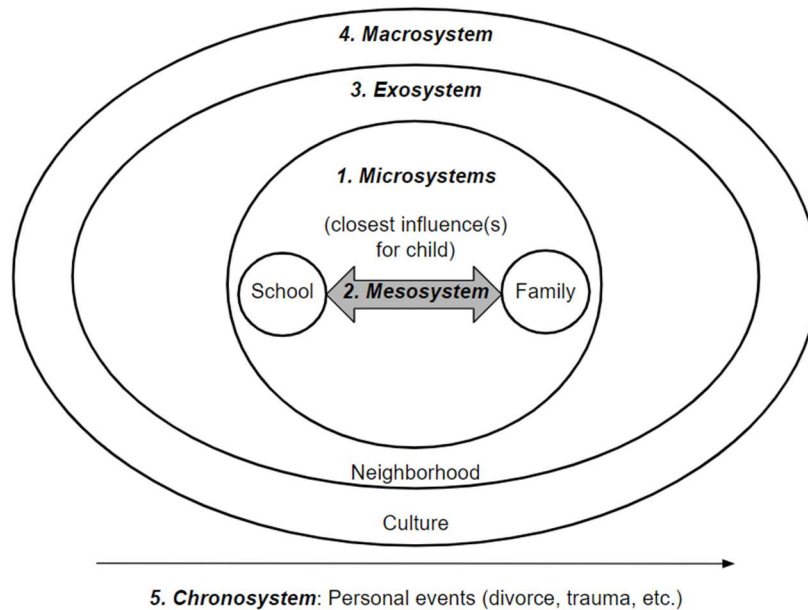
For the purposes of my research, I centered the social constructivist aspects of Piaget and Vygotsky's theories that emphasized the need for experiences leading to discovery, deeper

learning, and exposure to the ideas and perspectives of other learners. It is important to look at play in urban kindergarten settings because of the changing landscape of early childhood education and the increase in academic expectations placed on both early childhood educators and young children (Bassok et al., 2016).

**Bronfenbrenner.** With roots in Vygotsky and Piaget, sociocultural theories have evolved, specifically Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (1974). This theory consists of distinct and interrelated environmental levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1986; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2013; Paat, 2013), illustrated in Figure 2 as a concentric circle model, expanding outward from the microsystem (level 1) to the chronosystem (level 5).

**Figure 2**

*Conceptual Framework of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Levels*



*Note:* Adapted from Paat, Y. F. (2013).

Beginning in the center circle, the microsystem consists of family, school, neighborhood, religion, and peer groups and has the closest environmental proximity and influence for the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979, 1986), represented by the smaller circles within the circle. It

should be noted that not all microsystems are of equal influence or importance (e.g., family may supersede peer influence) and the number of microsystems increase as children get older (Paat, 2013). Level 2 is referred to as the mesosystem and consists of relationships and connections between microsystems (e.g., school and family) (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1986). The exosystem is the third level and consists of links between inactive social settings and immediate contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1986). For example, if a family frequently relocates, a child may have to adjust to a new school environment and establish new friendships. The fourth level is the macrosystem, which consists of the larger contexts (e.g., social, political, cultural) which surround a child and evolve over time (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2013; Paat, 2013). For instance, cultural norms vary between children growing up in different contexts. The fifth level is referred to as the chronosystem, which involves the personal events that take place during one's life over an extended period of time, such as divorce, death of a close relative, or experiencing a natural disaster (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

I rely on Bronfenbrenner's work in this study because it relates to Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model and the different types of capital Learners of Color experience and carry with them into their classrooms.

**Lave and Wenger.** Another sociocultural theoretical framework expanding from earlier works of Piaget (1962), Vygotsky (1978), and Bronfenbrenner (1974) is situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991), which stresses the importance of authentic contexts, real-life applications, active participation, and social interactions. In situated learning theory, learners ultimately move from an apprentice role, where they are exposed to opportunities for learning, toward full participation in their socially co-constructed learning community (Lave & Wenger,

1991), building an understanding of how their individual actions relate to the actions of others (Korthagen, 2010).

In what Lave & Wenger (1991) refer to as “legitimate peripheral participation,” learners begin as “newcomers” who forge relationships with “old-timers” about “activities, identities, artifacts, and communities of knowledge and practice” (p. 29), ultimately becoming a part of the community of practice.

Situated learning theory contrasts cognitive theory, as “situated learning theory tries to explain the role of embodied social learning, while cognitive theory aims at describing the characteristics of knowledge and knowledge development” (Korthagen, 2010, p. 99). Situated learning theory is valuable to a study on play in urban kindergarten environments because of the importance for young children to learn through hands-on, active experiences in social community contexts.

### **Research Design**

A qualitative, phenomenological case study was appropriate for this examination that explored the experiences of kindergarten teachers with implementing play-based learning in urban school settings, because I examined the issue of teachers’ understandings and experiences with play in the urban school environments of young children. According to Creswell (2014),

Qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures; collecting data in the participants’ setting; analyzing the data inductively, building from particulars to general themes; and making interpretations of the meaning of the data. (p. 294)

I chose to explore the phenomenon of play in urban environments because of the particularities of urban spaces in schooling. My conception of urban school settings aligns with Milner’s (2012b) term “urban emergent” (p. 559), which is offered as one of three conceptual frames for defining urban environments. Urban emergent is described by Milner (2012b) as schools which are situated in large cities and have some of the same characteristics and sometimes challenges as urban intensive schools (e.g., resources, teacher qualifications, levels of student achievement). While research regarding the implementation of play-based learning in “urban intensive” and “urban characteristic” (p. 559) environments would be beneficial to education research, it fell outside the scope of this research study. Table 3 outlines Milner’s full typology of urban environments and the position *Urban emergent* holds within that typology.

**Table 3**

*Milner’s (2012b) Typology of Urban Education*

<b>Category</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Example Cities</b>
Urban intensive	These schools are those that are concentrated in large, metropolitan cities across the United States	New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Atlanta
Urban emergent	These schools are those that are typically located in large cities but not as large as the major cities. They typically have some of the same characteristics and sometimes challenges as urban intensive schools and districts in terms of resources, qualification of teachers, and academic development of students.	Nashville, Tennessee; Austin, Texas; Columbus, Ohio; Charlotte, North Carolina
Urban characteristic	These schools are those that are not located in big cities but may be beginning to experience increases in challenges that are sometimes associated with urban contexts such as an increase in English language learners in a community. These schools may be located in what might be considered rural or even suburban areas.	[no cities listed in original]

*Note:* From Milner (2012).

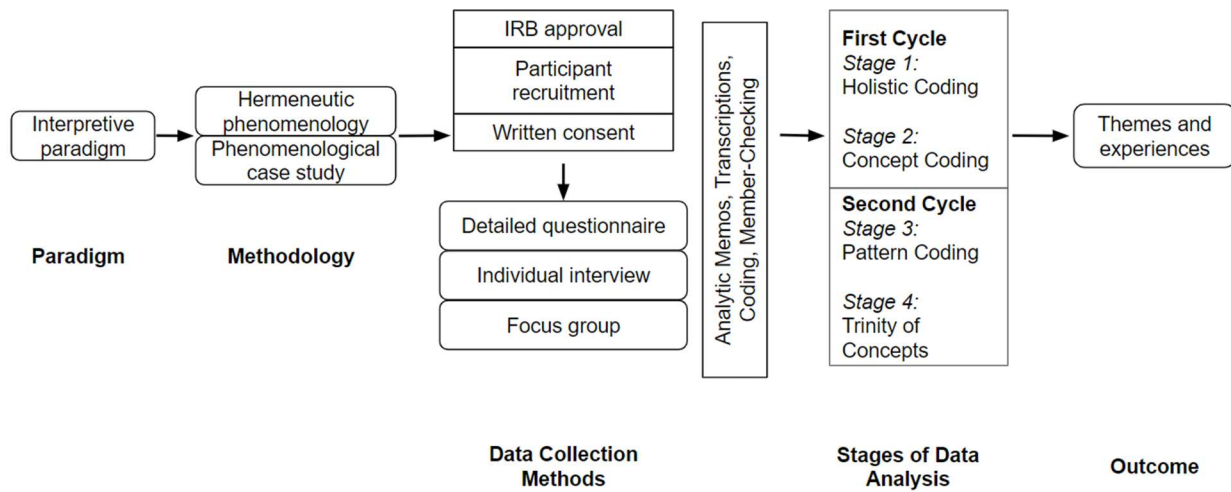
I focused this examination on kindergarten teachers' experiences with play-based learning in urban classrooms by gathering multiple types of data rather than a single source. The data types utilized in this inquiry were detailed questionnaires, individual teacher interviews, and a focus group. I analyzed the data for trends and themes and conducted analysis that was both inductive and deductive in nature to build an understanding of participant experiences (Creswell, 2014).

My role as the researcher was to interpret the detailed questionnaires and individual interview transcripts, review curricular documents, and note the interactions of teachers during their participation in the focus group, with the aim of making sense of and/or interpreting the phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The combined information gathered from the questionnaires, interviews, and focus group created rich descriptions of the educators and their experiences with the phenomenon (Creswell, 2014) of play-based learning in urban environments.

The nature of qualitative research implies reality is socially constructed and constantly changing, and therefore, complex (Glesne, 1999). A phenomenological inquiry encouraged me, as the researcher, to “consider the holistic, personal, and contextual complexities” of teacher experiences (Webb & Welsh, 2019, p. 175). Figure 3 illustrates an overview of the research approach implemented for this inquiry.

**Figure 3**

*Overview of Research Approach*



*Note:* Adapted from Ajjawi & Higgs (2007).

Each aspect of this flowchart will be described in the sections that follow.

***Phenomenological Approach***

A phenomenological approach was appropriate for this case study, as it focused on the lived experiences (Adams & van Manen, 2008; Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Creswell, 2014; Farrell, 2020; Neubauer et al., 2019; Østergaard et al., 2008; Webb & Welsh, 2019) of individuals and their encounters with a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2014; Webb & Welsh, 2019). Within phenomenological research it is emphasized that “it is essential for scholars to learn from the experiences of others” (Neubauer et al., 2019, p. 91), and such learning is “one of the greatest opportunities we have as a species” and is, “in fact, foundational” (Farrell, 2020, p. 1). Due to the imperative to learn from participant experiences, the aim of phenomenological research relies primarily on their views of the particular situation being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

There are two main approaches to phenomenological studies: descriptive and interpretive (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Descriptive, also referred to as transcendental phenomenology (Sloan &

Bowe, 2014; Neubauer et al., 2019), was developed by Husserl (Sloan & Bowe, 2014; Stolz, 2020), who “contended that no assumptions should inform phenomenology’s inquiry; no philosophical or scientific theory, no deductive logic procedures, and no other empirical science or psychological speculations should inform the inquiry” (Neubauer et al., 2019, p. 92). Additionally, Husserl believed the relationship between objective and subjective knowledge is intertwined, and “to understand the reality of a phenomenon is to understand the phenomenon as it is lived by a person” (Neubauer et al., 2019, p. 92).

Interpretive phenomenology, also referred to as hermeneutic phenomenology (Neubauer et al., 2019), was developed by Heidegger (Connelly, 2010, as cited in Sloan & Bowe, 2014; Neubauer et al., 2019), who was a student of Husserl (Farrell, 2020). Hermeneutic phenomenology “seeks to uncover the meaning and central structures, or essences, of a participant’s lived experience with a phenomenon and the contextual forces that shape it” and “can help researchers more fully understand complex, environmentally influenced phenomena” (Bynum & Varpio, 2017, p. 252). In this approach, the researcher strives to seek out the novel in the familiar (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003) through the unique experiences of each participant (Lavery, 2003; van Manen, 1997; Webb & Welsh, 2019). By studying the individual, subjective experiences (van Manen, 1997), words, and narratives of participants, a researcher can better understand and make meaning (Walker, 1997) of what is referred to as one’s “*lifeworld*” (Neubauer et al., 2019, p. 94, emphasis in original).

According to Neubauer and colleagues (2019), “To choose a phenomenological research methodology requires the scholar to reflect on the philosophy they embrace” (p. 91). After considering both descriptive and interpretive phenomenological studies and given my desire to gain an understanding of the experiences of kindergarten teachers with implementing play-based

learning in urban school settings, I determined hermeneutic phenomenology was the most appropriate approach for this inquiry.

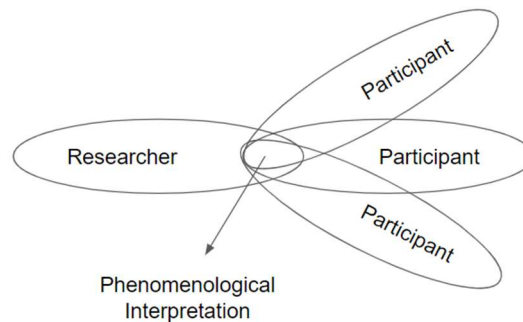
There are three features of hermeneutic phenomenology that distinguish it from other qualitative methodologies, as described by Bynum and Varpio (2017): “(i) its interpretive nature and focus on *lived experience*, (ii) the inclusion of researcher experiences in the processes of data collection and analysis, and (iii) the dynamic, thoughtful process of reflecting and writing that guides data analysis” (p. 252, emphasis in original). In this inquiry exploring play-based learning, the purpose of the inquiry was to detail rich descriptions of a phenomena and better understand the experiences of participants (Creswell, 2014), give participants voice (Sloan & Bowe, 2014), and engage in the co-construction of knowledge (Webb & Welsh, 2019). My research addressed each of these components: it was interpretive and focused on the lived experiences of kindergarten classroom teachers; the research included me, as the researcher; in the process of data collection and analysis, my reflection and writing guided the analysis; and I provided rich descriptions of the phenomena while co-constructing the knowledge with participants.

Further, the objective of my research was not to gather universal meaning, but rather to explore the experiences of each educator, and their individual, unique truths, as sculpted by their own backgrounds and contexts (Webb & Welsh, 2019). Lived experiences (Adams & van Manen, 2008; Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Creswell, 2014; Farrell, 2020; Neubauer et al 2019; Østergaard et al., 2008; Webb & Welsh, 2019) refer to how participants interact with or experience a particular phenomenon (play-based learning) within a given context or culture (urban kindergarten classrooms) (Creswell, 2013). In my use of interpretive phenomenological

design, I drew from Webb and Welsh's (2019) phenomenological interpretation, shown in Figure 4.

#### **Figure 4**

##### *Phenomenological Interpretation*



*Note:* Adapted from Webb & Welsh (2019).

The individual experiences of the educators, converging with my experience as the researcher, collectively contributed to the phenomenological interpretation and description of meanings and the influence of those meanings on individual choices (Webb & Welsh, 2019).

Webb and Welsh (2019) acknowledge that a challenge of taking on a phenomenological approach is that the research results are influenced by the case study population and time frame of data collection. The findings largely depend on articulation of experiences by participants in interviews and limited by the participation of willing volunteers who may have reasons for wanting (or not wanting) to participate (Webb & Welsh, 2019).

#### ***Case Study***

A case study approach was chosen for this exploration of teacher experiences with play-based learning in urban kindergarten settings. A case study intends to provide “understanding, extension of experience, and increase in conviction in that which is known” (Stake, 1978, p. 6). Case studies play important roles in education research as they enhance our understanding of

individuals, communities, and contextual experiences (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013). Case studies primarily utilize qualitative designs, are bound by time and activity (Creswell, 2014), and aim for an in-depth understanding of each case (Moss & Haertel, 2016).

Most case studies are characterized by complex descriptions, an informal, narrative writing style, implicit comparisons, and data likely gathered through observation (Stake, 1978). In a case study, phenomena are both deconstructed and reconstructed (Baxter & Jack, 2008) through the use of detailed descriptions of settings and individuals and in-depth analysis of the cases to identify themes or concerns (Creswell, 2014). Stake (1978) contends, “The case study... proliferates rather than narrows. One is left with more to pay attention to rather than less” (p. 7). A case study approach allows for the development of deep understanding through the study of programs, individuals, or processes (Merriam, 1998) in a manner that is in-depth and holistic in nature (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 1990).

The work of Baxter and Jack (2008) was considered in the designing of this play-based study. They suggest a case study approach in the following circumstances:

- (a) the focus of the study is to answer ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions;
- (b) you cannot manipulate the behaviour of those involved in the study;
- (c) you want to cover contextual conditions because you believe they are relevant to the phenomenon under study; or
- (d) the boundaries are not clear between the phenomenon and context. (p. 545)

My play-based study aligns with three of the four factors mentioned: (b) being unable to manipulate the behavior of the participants; (c) addressing the contextual conditions due to their relevance in the studied phenomenon; and (d) unclear boundaries between the context and the

phenomenon. Ultimately, it would not have been possible for me to research play-based learning without teachers sharing their experiences, which took place in kindergarten contexts.

Since my inquiry into the experiences of kindergarten teachers in urban classroom settings aimed to provide deep, rich descriptions of teachers and their opportunities to implement play-based learning, a case study approach was the most purposeful and appropriate design. My inquiry had qualities of both descriptive and instrumental case study approaches. A descriptive case study describes phenomenon and real-life context (Yin, 2003). An instrumental case study offers in-depth insight into an issue, where through scrutiny of the context(s), the ordinary becomes detailed (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Stake, 1995).

A phenomenological case study utilizing a hermeneutic approach guided this work of understanding the implementation of play-based learning within urban kindergarten classroom environments.

### ***Researcher Positionality***

As a child growing up in a predominantly white, middle-class community, I always wanted to be a teacher. My mother would patiently endure spelling lessons taught from extra workbooks purchased at rummage sales and watch as I painstakingly and meticulously printed words on the chalkboard which hung in my bedroom. I began traditional schooling at the age of 5, attending morning kindergarten at a local public school. I distinctly remember sitting in rows on the floor, always in alphabetical order. Because of this system, I spent most of my elementary school career sandwiched between the same two students.

Our kindergarten lessons on the carpet were spent talking about words or listening to stories. At times, we would go up and down the rows, sharing our responses to questions our teacher asked us as a group. After carpet time, we had a few minutes to play. The play area

always felt crowded, as though there were too many children vying for the blocks or to have a spot at the sand table. Playtime went by quickly, and I remember feeling like we had just gotten started before being ushered to our table spots to color. I typically finished quickly, and when I would proudly show my work to my teacher, she would ask me to sit down and fill in all of the white space on my paper.

Once I began first grade, I fell into the monotony of Daily Oral Language lessons, math concepts taught out of workbooks, weekly spelling tests, and reading from basal readers. I distinctly remember my first-grade teacher sitting on the chair in the front of the classroom with the teacher manual on her lap, surrounded on the carpet by twenty or so young learners who thought this was how school was meant to be experienced; we did not know any different. A lunch recess and perhaps a morning or afternoon recess were the only playtime that we experienced as elementary-aged learners, from what I recall. The remainder of my elementary, middle, and high school career followed similar patterns of sitting in desks or at tables, completing worksheets, and engaging in call and response instructional methods.

**Becoming an Educator.** In my teacher preparation courses, field work encounters, and student teaching experiences, play was not prioritized. Filing cabinets of worksheets and stacks of workbooks were still the predominant teaching method, and I suppose I thought that was the norm, just as when I was a child. From my experiences as both a learner and as a pre-service educator, it seemed to me that a “good” teacher was one who had everything organized by time of year and topic and could find a worksheet or resource quickly and efficiently within a filing system.

When I eventually began my first official teaching position, the theme of worksheets and workbooks continued. I was teaching in a school that utilized Direct Instruction programming,

with scripted lessons, snapping finger signals to which students would respond, and rigid expectations to adhere to scope and sequence documents with fidelity. Because of this intense focus on traditional academic instruction, children in 4-year-old kindergarten (4K) through grade 5 received only one 20-minute recess in an 8-hour school day. Toys and hands-on learning materials were not prevalent in classrooms and activities that included coloring, cutting, and gluing were discouraged.

The school primarily served families from a high-poverty background, with 99% of students qualifying for free-and-reduced lunch and ninety-nine percent of families speaking Spanish as their first language. Teaching positions were filled by a predominantly white teaching staff, and the school immersed students in English instruction, reprimanding learners for speaking Spanish to one another. Military-like teaching techniques were encouraged as a means to “save” the children from their economic situations. Classroom teachers in all grades (4K-12th) were tasked with promoting a college education.

Accountability measures were experienced firsthand, with pushes for standardization and a focus on readiness and assessments. I vividly recall teaching a math lesson and noticing an administrator standing in the hallway between my classroom and that of another 3rd grade teacher. Later, we were questioned on why at that exact moment we were not at the same part of the same lesson. There was no consideration for the needs of our learners and whether they needed reteaching, enrichment, or other support. Our pacing guides and assessments were checked regularly, and we would be questioned if 85% of our “scholars” did not score 85% or above on a given assessment. There was an expectation that each child made a year and a half of growth each school year, regardless of their academic starting point. A “making every minute count” mentality was forced upon teachers, as administrators timed transitions and lesson

components with stopwatches and calculated percentages of children they deemed to be demonstrating “on-task” behaviors. Such intense structure, accountability measures, and demands for standardization left little to no time to truly understand the needs of learners, personalize learning experiences, build relationships, or establish a classroom culture that valued every child’s lived experiences.

While I bristled at the method of teaching, as a new educator in her mid-twenties, I was thankful to have a job, especially since I was hired on the first day of school to begin immediately. I admit, at times, I bought into the justification for why things were done in such regimented ways, although I see now how damaging deficit mindsets and biased attitudes were on our learners, their families, and their communities. At the time, I wanted to save the world and I thought my students needed me to be their hero. Looking back, I can see how this deficit perspective (Bubikova et al., 2019; Harris, 2012; Jacobs, 2018; Miller, 2010), coupled with ineffective teaching practices and policies severely limited the academic, emotional, and social achievements of young children. At that point in my career, I did not understand the importance of culturally and linguistically sustaining practices. In retrospect, I should have advocated for practices that honored the cultural wealth of each learner and their families.

**Shifting Roles and Perspectives.** When I moved from my first school to a suburban public school district, I noticed a shift in how children were centered in the learning environment. The school seemed to be more “kid-friendly,” as children were celebrated rather than forced into molds. We were encouraged by administrators to build an understanding of home environments and cultures and incorporate them into our classroom communities. When new learning programs were adopted, administrators emphasized hands-on learning rather than

worksheets and workbooks. Meeting learners where they were academically and behaviorally was supported and endorsed.

During my time in this public school district, I decided to pursue National Board Certification as an Early Childhood Generalist. It was through this work that I developed an understanding and deep appreciation of the importance of play and how play-based learning experiences support learners in developing a variety of social, emotional, and academic skills. This experience sparked my passion and interest in play-based learning and encouraged me to become an advocate for play moving forward. In addition to gaining an interest in play-based learning, I also became interested in literacy instruction. I began coursework at a local university to earn a reading teacher certification. This work introduced me to Wohlwend's (2008, 2011, 2015, 2017, 2018a, 2018b) studies regarding play and literacy, which contributed to my growing belief in the power of play in children's learning experiences.

With a desire to move into leadership roles, I transitioned first into an instructional coaching position and the following year, an elementary principal position, in two urban school districts. In both roles, I had opportunities to work with many caring and inspiring educators who genuinely wanted their learners to thrive and valued their individual identities and life experiences. Unfortunately, there were also teachers and staff members who may not have yet understood the importance of culturally and linguistically sustaining practices, based on comments made about their students and requests for exclusionary disciplinary measures.

Since the teaching staff of both schools were primarily white and the children were predominantly Learners of Color, I aimed to guide teachers in being more inclusive and encouraging more equitable practices. I attempted this by redirecting negative comments, challenging deficit views, and shifting the narrative from how the school "used to be" or "should

be” to how we should acknowledge and challenge our own biases and forefront identity and intersections of identity (i.e., race, culture, ethnicity, gender, learning abilities, life circumstances).

Serving as an instructional coach and principal also provided opportunities for me to advocate for, encourage, and promote play and hands-on learning experiences. In one school district, it was reported to me that play had been banned in the years prior, with play-based learning materials such as kitchen sets, sand tables, and blocks removed from classrooms. When I began working in the district, teachers, especially in 4K, had recently been told that “play is okay!” and engaged in professional development to reintegrate play into their classroom learning environments. This stance was welcomed, and classrooms seemed to embrace hands-on learning activities, songs, and more active learning activities. However, the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic caused an abrupt halt to in-person learning. My district, like other districts across the country, shifted to virtual, distance learning for the remainder of the school year.

During my time in leadership positions, I reflected on my practice and identity as an educator. I gathered enlightening perspectives by stepping outside of the classroom walls and recognized my ability to influence both educators and children through my work in such roles. However, I recognized I was very unhappy in my career since leaving the classroom and made the decision to resign from my administrative position at the end of the school year. The decision to return to the classroom turned out to be the best decision I have made in my educational career.

**Returning to the Classroom.** After deciding to return to the classroom, I was offered and accepted a teaching position in a high-performing, suburban school district. When I was hired, the district emphasized personalized learning and did not have a designated literacy

curriculum. Instead, they offered a variety of “resources” to be used with the teacher’s discretion to meet the individual needs of each learner. Within a year, I became a lead teacher in play-based learning and felt encouraged and excited to implement such practices into my classroom instruction. Promoting and supporting developmentally appropriate instruction became part of my work as a lead teacher and I finally felt that my pedagogical beliefs aligned with the expectations placed upon me as a teacher. Even with COVID-19 restrictions and protocols, I still felt as though I could make learner-driven decisions and support their education with hands-on experiences, choice, and social interactions, albeit with social distancing measures in place.

However, my excitement became stifled after a few years in the school district. Across the country and in my own district, new school board members were elected, along with the promotion of new political agendas (Carrillo et al., 2023). The ability to make developmentally appropriate instructional decisions gradually became stifled. With board members promoting rote memorization techniques and calling for detentions and suspensions of elementary aged children, my district shifted toward more standardized practices with the sudden adoption of a new literacy program. While this was perhaps in response to new legislation around literacy instruction, it came as an abrupt decision, as we were told numerous programs would be piloted before the formal adoption of a new curriculum.

While I am committed to incorporating play-based learning experiences within the structure of our new literacy program, I am also tasked with implementing the program with “integrity.” Despite the numerous workbook pages my learners are expected to complete each day, I am committed to advocating for and implementing frequent movement, hands-on learning, and offer play-based learning experiences (Stremmel et al., 2019; Yogman et al., 2018) to support the emotional, social, and academic needs of my learners.

## *Reflexivity*

Reflexivity remains at the core of who I am as a teacher. Within the field of qualitative research, reflexivity, or “the process by which the gaze of the researcher is turned upon oneself,” has a long history (Swaminathan & Mulvihill, 2014, p. 95). Swaminathan and Mulvihill (2017) assert, “To be reflexive, a researcher has an ongoing internal conversation that asks two questions—first, what does the researcher know and second, how does the researcher know it?” (p. 95). With these questions in mind, I have come to understand reflexivity as a researcher’s reflection or examination of a situation or experience as they relate to the interpretation of situations and their meanings (Neubauer et al., 2019; Sloan & Bowe, 2014), as well as how their interpretations are shaped by their biases, values, and backgrounds (Creswell, 2014).

I found hermeneutic phenomenology to be a match for my study, as with this approach, “researchers openly reflect on, share, and attend to their subjectivity during data collection and analysis” (Bynum & Varpio, 2017, p. 252). Therefore, the background, prior knowledge, and/or experience of the researcher may influence the gathering and analysis of data (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Neubauer and colleagues (2019) state,

Hermeneutic phenomenology recognizes that the researcher, like the research subject, cannot be rid of his/her lifeworld. Instead, the researcher’s past experiences and knowledge are valuable guides to the inquiry. It is the researcher’s education and knowledge base that lead him/her to consider a phenomenon or experience worthy of investigation. To ask the research to take an unbiased approach to the data is inconsistent with hermeneutic phenomenology’s philosophical roots. (p. 95)

As a practicing teacher, my experiences and knowledge about the field of education have shaped my worldview, leading me to an interest in studying play-based learning. Lareau (2021)

asserts one's identity matters when conducting a study, and issues of identity connected to pathways taken within the research journey may be framed as the "insider/outsider debate" (p. 27), as both roles provide limitations and opportunities (Swaminathan & Mulvihill, 2017). The notion of being an insider suggests that experiences and memberships within communities can "improve the quality, legitimacy, and value of a research project" (Lareau, 2021, p. 27). Being an outsider in research can "bring fresh insights" (p. 29) and requires a crucial respect for the participants in the study, as well as a need to avoid assumptions.

Since I have a background in early childhood classroom pedagogy and educational practices, I take on roles as both an insider and an outsider. As an insider, I understand shared language regarding the topic of early childhood instruction as well as descriptions of the "locally constructed reality" (Webb & Welsh, 2019, p. 173). With a hermeneutic phenomenological study, taking on the role of an insider can aid in establishing trust and building rapport between me as the researcher and the participants in the study (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007). As an outsider, I am able to obtain descriptions of multiple classroom environments from participants and am therefore able to seek out commonalities and differences which one who is embedded in the context may not be able to notice.

I believe teachers are in a delicate position of balancing their pedagogy with school and district initiatives, curricula, and expectations and what is seen in the classroom may not necessarily reflect the actual beliefs of the educator. I am committed to being open to the unexpected and acknowledge the idea that different classrooms have different learners and therefore, different needs. Since my research was merely a snapshot into the lived experiences of kindergarten educators, the use of detailed questionnaires, conducting individual interviews, and

facilitating a focus group helped me to better understand the backgrounds and pedagogical beliefs of the educators and gain insight into their day-to-day realities.

I acknowledge my own bias toward belief in play from a pedagogical stance and also my perspective as an educator in early childhood grade levels. My personal experiences in urban school settings led me to believe that play-based learning is not prioritized or valued. Throughout this inquiry I had to be careful to avoid comparisons between teachers and how they navigated their classroom environments, school and district policies, and their individual school contexts. Comparing teachers, their decisions, and their outcomes could have led to distrust from participants toward me as the researcher and would have negatively impacted the study.

Throughout this inquiry, I was committed to remaining objective in questioning and sought to understand the experiences of my research participants. In doing so, I offered participants' narratives through the use of their own voices.

### **Study Context**

Conducting this study in urban school settings was important, as education policies, historical changes, and social and political environments impact urban school environments (Rury & Mirel, 1997). "Because schools are so often defined by their immediate social environment, the social geography of cities and their larger metropolitan regions exerts a telling effect on education" (p. 50). Considering the context of a city goes beyond thinking about the more obvious spatial relationships, geographic arrangements, population densities, and hierarchical statuses of residences to looking at how social, economic, and historical forces have shaped the current urban education environment (Rury & Mirel, 1997).

For this inquiry of kindergarten teachers with their experiences implementing play-based learning, I conducted research with three participants representing two public school districts and

one public charter school. The school settings were situated within two cities, one of which was considered urban emergent (Milner, 2012b) and one considered a “vulnerable inner ring suburb” (Hanlon, 2009, p. 232) of the urban emergent city. According to Hanlon (2009), inner-ring suburbs described as “vulnerable” are characterized by socioeconomic decline and racial and ethnic transition which occurred between 1980 and 2000 and are considered “working-class” and were at one time composed of large numbers of “blue-collar workers” (p. 234). All schools were located in the Midwestern region of the United States.

The school settings included in this study were dependent upon the participants included in this inquiry. The participants in this study and their individual settings were samples of convenience (Neuman, 2011), as logistically, they were a reasonable distance for me to recruit, collect data, engage with participants, and support participation in this research.

In the 2022-2023 school year, the primary urban school district in the area reported a population of approximately 67,000 students ([State] Department of Public Instruction, 2024) out of a city population of approximately 570,000 residents. This midwestern city has been described as one of the most racially segregated cities in the United States (Foltman, 2019; Nelsen, 2015; Paulson et al., 2016). Patterns of racial discrimination in housing practices (Bonds et al., 2009; Desmond, 2016; Nelsen, 2015) including redlining (Foltman, 2019) and busing (Nelsen, 2015) have reinforced segregation in the primary city school district and local schools, leading to greater educational disparities since property taxes typically support local schools (Bonds et al., 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2004; Farmer-Hinton, 2002; Obidah & Howard, 2005).

Table 4 outlines the demographics of each setting included in this study, including total district/school enrollment, percentage of Learners of Color, percentage of students with

dis/abilities, percentage of students considered economically disadvantaged, and percentage of English language learners.

**Table 4**

*Demographics of Districts and Schools*

	<b>Setting 1 Public School District</b>		<b>Setting 2 Public Charter School</b>		<b>Setting 3 Public School District</b>	
	<b>District</b>	<b>School</b>	<b>District</b>	<b>School</b>	<b>District</b>	<b>School</b>
Approximate Enrollment	67,495	838	632	257	7,418	240
Learners of Color	90.7%	79.7%	75.6%	89.9%	51.5%	44.6%
Students with Dis/abilities	19.1%	26.3%	8.06%	8.2%	15.6%	13.3%
Economically Disadvantaged	82.5%	74.3%	33.2%	23.3%	63%	62.5%
English Language Learners	14.5%	13.1%	0%	0%	4.1%	2.9%

*Note:* Adapted from [https://dpi.\[state\].gov/accountability/report-cards](https://dpi.[state].gov/accountability/report-cards).

In considering the urban school settings included in this study, it was important to understand the demographics of the school district(s), as well as the historical processes that have shaped the current school landscape since such factors may influence the instructional decisions of educators in urban school settings. Specifically, when considering the context for this study, it was important to keep in mind the fact that Learners of Color make up the majority of students in many urban public school districts in the United States but are directed by policies and practices that are centered on white, middle-class norms of educational achievement (Alim & Paris, 2017; Levinson & Sutton, 2001).

### *Site Selection and Rationale*

Milner (2012) asserts that urban school districts are hosts to a “rich array of excellence, intellect, and talent among the people in urban environments,” representing “human capital that make meaningful contributions to the very fabric of the human condition in the United States and abroad” (p. 558). However, these qualities are often overlooked or diminished due to systemic practices and processes that have historically created and encouraged race and class-based inequities in the field of education (Jordan, 2022; Love, 2019; Morales-James et al., 2012; Noguera, 2003). Conducting this inquiry in urban school settings was important because policies and practices do not always adequately or appropriately serve the students who attend urban schools and often, students and parents are blamed for problems that occur (Milner, 2012b).

Initially, my plan was to include an observation in this study, which would have allowed me to see the school settings of the participants first-hand and describe the classroom contexts in detail. However, in the process of recruiting participants, my requests for access to schools and teachers were denied by multiple public school districts and public charter school principals. This process will be described in detail in the section on Participant Recruitment. Since I was not able to physically go into school buildings to conduct this research, meetings were held virtually using the Zoom video conferencing platform, as that was determined to be most convenient for the participants.

As a researcher conducting this inquiry, I was and continue to be interested in contributing to studies that explore urban school settings, as there is often disparity in teacher quality (Milner, 2012b), resources (Milner, 2012b; Zosh et al., 2022), and access to play-based learning experiences (DeMarie, 2010; Jarrett et al., 2015; Rand & Morrow, 2021).

### ***Participant Selection and Rationale***

The participants included in this study represented a purposeful (Creswell, 2014), convenience sample (Neuman, 2011) of three current or former kindergarten teachers. As the “primary sampling strategy” in a qualitative study, purposeful sampling allowed me as the researcher to select “individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 326).

Purposeful sampling was necessary due to the teaching and incorporation of academic content such as literacy and mathematics skills in five-year-old kindergarten (5K); the standards and curricular implications on the grade level, as many curricular programs begin in kindergarten; and the Common Core State Standards in the areas of English Language Arts (ELA) (Appendix A) and Mathematics (Appendix B) (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010a, 2010b). These standards begin in 5K and are utilized across numerous school districts across the country, including the school districts of the participants involved in this study.

A convenience sample was chosen for this qualitative study because of the nonrandom quality and this method allows for cases that are available, easy to reach, and convenient for the researcher to conduct the inquiry (Neuman, 2011). Such a sample was appropriate in this inquiry because I was limited by who wanted to participate in the study. While I welcomed all races, cultures, genders, gender identities, sexual orientations, ages, socio-economic statuses, and abilities to participate in this study, I could not control the diversity of the population who ultimately elected to participate. The demographics of the participants in this study are included in Table 5.

**Table 5**

*Demographics of Participants*

<b>Participant (name de-identified)</b>	<b>Age Range</b>	<b>Race</b>
Camille	40-49	white
Audrey	40-49	white
Lauren	40-49	white

As captured in Table 5, the three educators who chose to participate in this inquiry represent a homogenous sample. Given the low participation rate despite my broad recruitment efforts, I welcomed the three educators who expressed interest in participating.

My rationale for having three participants was to develop an understanding of the current status of play-based learning across different kindergarten contexts. The three participants in this study represented an urban public school district, a public charter school, and a district located in a “vulnerable” inner-ring suburb (Hanlon, 2009) adjacent to the large urban emergent city (Milner, 2012). Having participants represent multiple school settings allowed me to generate comparisons within and across contexts and provided insight into the research questions from a larger regional standpoint. Originally, I aimed to include 3-5 participants in the study, but due to the time consumed with attempting to obtain school district approval, which was subsequently denied, as well as the limitations of my own timeline as a dissertation researcher, I gratefully accepted the three participants who expressed interest in participating in the study.

The criteria for participants were teachers currently or formerly employed as full-time, 5-year-old kindergarten (5K) educators in urban public or charter school settings. Participants were the teacher of record for a minimum of two years, as within that time they likely experienced curricular, instructional, and systemic shifts in education. Studying one grade level in a number

of settings allowed for pattern seeking across environments. Educators working in Montessori programs were not included in this study, as Montessori schools are characterized by their self-directed learning environments and emphasis on hands-on education (Lillard, 2018). The goal of this research study was to understand the reality of educators of kindergarten-aged learners in traditional, public school environments.

According to Creswell and Poth (2017), a variation in years of experience and discipline likely reflects different perspectives, which is considered ideal for qualitative research such as this study on the experiences of kindergarten educators. The participants in this study each had over 15 years of experience in the field of education and multiple years of experience teaching kindergarten aged learners, as well as other grade levels and in different school settings. The three teachers who participated in this inquiry are described below.

**Camille.** Camille has worked in her large, urban school district situated in an urban emergent city (Milner, 2012b) her entire career. In her 21st year of teaching at the time this study was conducted, Camille has taught kindergarten for all but three years, when she taught first grade. Prior to moving into her professional role as an educator, Camille attended a local university for her teaching credentials, where as a student, she worked at the education center located on the campus which provides childcare and education for infants through kindergarten/school aged children.

**Audrey.** Working in a charter school located in an urban emergent city (Milner, 2012b), Audrey has nineteen years of experience teaching early childhood aged children. Prior to teaching in her current 4K/5K multi-age position, she substitute taught, worked in a charter school that has since closed, taught preschool and kindergarten abroad in Budapest, and now works in a different charter school where she has worked for the past eleven years. Audrey

taught second grade for a couple of years, but most of her experience has been with kindergarten aged learners.

**Lauren.** Lauren is in her nineteenth year in education and is currently employed as a first-grade teacher in a suburban school district. It is her third year in her current district, where she moved after being employed for six years as a 4K/5K teacher in a school district situated in a “vulnerable” inner-ring suburb (Hanlon, 2009) of a large metropolitan city. Prior to that experience, she taught 4K for three years and third grade for seven years in a large private school located in an urban emergent city (Milner, 2012b).

The significant contributions of the three participants involved in this study will be discussed in detail in Chapter Four.

### ***Participant Recruitment and Consent***

After obtaining approval to conduct this study from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) (Appendix C) in January 2024, I began the process of recruiting participants, which occurred through two approaches. Initially, I reached out to the district administrators of two large urban school districts in the area. After completing the research application process for one district, my request was denied without any reason given. The second district followed up my research request with a brief meeting to discuss a few questions they had for me and my dissertation committee chair. The first question they asked was about why I thought their district would be a suitable place to conduct research about play-based learning. After a few other clarifying questions, we were told that with state testing coming up (which typically begins in grade 3), all energies would be going toward that priority and teachers may feel too stressed to have a visitor in their school. A couple of weeks later, I was told that their “process” was closed, and I would not be allowed to conduct research in their district. Being denied access to these two large

districts was a setback to my data collection process, as each district contained multiple elementary schools with numerous sections of kindergarten. This also implied that I could not reach out to teachers that I knew personally within those districts for snowball recruitment, even after making adjustments to the methods included in my research, specifically removing the observation component.

Without access to two major school districts, I turned my attention to local charter schools. Charter schools in this case are described as public schools operating as schools “of choice” (National Charter School Resource Center (NCSRC), n.d.). Charter schools “are exempt from significant state or local regulations related to operation and management but otherwise adhere to regulations of public schools — for example, charter schools cannot charge tuition or be affiliated with a religious institution” (para. 1). These schools are held accountable by their local chartering agency and are autonomous, meaning “they have more flexibility in the operations and management of the school than traditional public schools” (para. 2).

With immediate approval from the charter school director overseeing schools operating within a local charter system, I reached out to the nine principals with my research request. Even with personalized, follow-up emails, I received only one response, but was able to successfully recruit one participant with many years of kindergarten teaching experience.

A second approach to recruiting was to identify kindergarten teachers within my professional network and implement a snowball, or chain, sampling strategy (Emerson, 2015; Noy, 2008). Through this snowball sampling approach, I asked people within my personal and professional network to identify and refer current and former kindergarten teachers who may have an interest in participating in the examination of teachers’ experiences with play-based learning in urban school settings. The criteria of teaching kindergarten within an urban school

district was centered in the recruitment process, and through the snowball sampling approach, I was able to recruit two additional participants, each with over 15 years of experience in education. Since the observation component was removed from the list of experiences for the participants and it was decided I would not physically be entering the classroom, I did not need to receive additional permissions from schools or districts.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection for this study examining play-based learning in urban kindergarten environments included a detailed questionnaire, an individual interview, and a focus group session with all participants. Originally, I planned to conduct an observation of each educator in their kindergarten classroom setting the week following the individual interview. The intent was to observe each educators' practice in action and make connections between their interview responses and their actual instructional practices. However, since the need to obtain permission to conduct research in schools from districts proved to be a barrier to recruitment, the observation was removed.

As a practicing educator, I understood that educators' lives were filled with numerous personal and professional responsibilities. Therefore, my goal was to ensure that participation in this study would not exceed more than approximately 1.5-2 hours of time for each of the participants. Once participation was confirmed, the data collection process moved relatively quickly, with the distribution of questionnaires, conducting individual interviews, and facilitating the focus group all taking place within the span of a few weeks. Table 6 outlines the order and purpose of the data collection methods, as well as the time commitment for each participant. Details of each data collection method are included in the subsequent sections.

**Table 6***Timeline of Data Collection*

<b>Data Collection Method</b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Time Commitment</b>
Detailed Questionnaires	First phase of data collection; aimed to understand background of each participant; included demographic information and consent form	20-30 minutes
Individual Interviews	Second phase of data collection; aimed to further explore responses to detailed questionnaire and elicit topics for focus group conversation	30-40 minutes
Focus Group	Final phase of data collection; aimed to facilitate a collaborative conversation amongst participants; opportunity for collaborative member checking of themes that were emerging; conclusion of participant experience with opportunity to share final thoughts, beliefs about early childhood education, etc.	45 minutes – 1 hour

***Detailed Questionnaire***

Once participants accepted the invitation to participate in the formal study, I distributed a detailed, qualitative questionnaire (Appendix D) utilizing the online survey tool, Qualtrics. The questionnaire included the consent form and questions regarding demographic information. Qualitative questionnaires aim to generate rich material and gather information regarding various aspects of the everyday lives of participants (Eckerdal & Hagström, 2017). Neuman (2011) emphasizes the importance of thinking about questionnaires holistically, with the questions transitioning smoothly from one to the next. Neuman (2011) also centers the need to avoid confusion or frustration for participants by asking clear questions and keeping in mind their perspectives.

Administering the questionnaire as the first experience in this study and placing it before the individual interview was an intentional and purposeful decision. The questionnaire provided

me as the researcher with background information to better understand the kindergarten teaching experiences of each participant and their individual stances on play, expectations for kindergarten, and beliefs about early childhood education. This information provided me with insights into the pedagogical beliefs of each educator before our interview conversation.

The detailed questionnaire included both Likert scale questions and open-ended follow-up questions. Asking these questions in written form allowed for and encouraged participants to contribute rich narratives based on their experiences (Eckerdal & Hagström, 2017) as kindergarten teachers working in urban school settings.

### ***Individual Interview***

After completing the detailed questionnaire, each educator was invited to engage in an initial interview in order for me to gain an understanding of their journey to becoming an educator, their pedagogical beliefs around the topic of play, and experience with teaching kindergarten in an urban school setting. My intent for interviewing was the co-creation of meaning between the participants and myself as the researcher (Swaminathan & Mulvihill, 2017). Interviews are deemed useful in gathering reflective recollections of experiences (Sloan & Bowe, 2014) and aligns with phenomenological research, in which knowledge is co-constructed between the researcher and participants (Webb & Welsh, 2019).

Swaminathan and Mulvihill (2014) stress that “the depth of the interview will depend on the rapport between the interviewer and participant” (p. 48). Therefore, it was important to help each participant feel comfortable, as this aimed to be a conversation and not an interrogation (Lareau, 2021). To help with the flow of conversation, I shared the interview questions prior to our meeting. This provided participants with time to consider and articulate their responses and also encouraged transparency with the interview topics.

At the start of the interview, I shared information about my own educational journey and experience to help the participants feel more relaxed and better understand my personal background. I found the sharing of questions as well as my educational background beneficial in building rapport and trust with the participants, supporting the flow of conversation. Including statements that thanked the participant for their time and for sharing their expertise, as well as assuring them that recording the interview was for my use and for the purposes of data analysis seemed to help put the participants at ease. I also reminded participants that they did not have to discuss any questions that made them feel uncomfortable and were able to end the discussion at any time. I made sure to ask each participant if they had any questions for me, as it was important for the conversation to feel open and comfortable, and not one-sided.

Since my research was qualitative in nature, the interview questions were generally open-ended (Appendix E) and allowed for the views and opinions of the participants to be elicited (Creswell, 2014). Keeping questions open-ended encouraged me to maintain curiosity as the researcher, while being “open to being surprised” if something emerged that redirected the inquiry (Lareau, 2021, p. 63). Follow-up questions were asked throughout the interview to gain additional insights, gather examples, and to encourage participants to share their stories.

Each interview took between 30-40 minutes, and we met wherever it was most convenient for the participant (in-person or via Zoom video-conferencing). With the consent of the participant, I audio recorded the discussion through an application on my phone. Immediately following the interview, I wrote an “analytic memo” (Lareau, 2021, p. 89) to document what I learned from the interview, summarize the interaction, and create a profile of each participant. Specifically, I described the person, the setting of the conversation, and other key moments and details, using my notes from the conversation. I also noted any nonverbal moments of the

interview, such as a frown, leaning forward, slouching down in the chair. Appendix F offers a context notes sheet that was utilized as an analytic memo template for the purposes of documenting this information.

Interviews were transcribed and coded as soon as possible after the interaction. This was done to gauge if there were any follow-up questions and also so I could begin the coding process in an efficient and timely manner. Immediate coding was imperative, as one activity for the focus group was to review the themes and takeaways that arose from the interviews as part of the collaborative member checking process. This also gave participants an opportunity to clarify any aspects of their experiences they felt were not accurately communicated or portrayed, provide elaboration on the topics, and engage in conversation with one another about the takeaways that were noted.

### ***Focus Group with Collaborative Member Checking***

After the detailed questionnaire and individual interviews were completed, I invited participants to engage in a focus group session, which provided me the opportunity to conduct collaborative member checking (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Focus groups serve as a type of group interview that encourages communication and conversation between participants (Kitzinger, 1995), aiming to generate new ideas within the context of the social interaction (Breen, 2006). Qualitative research specifically focuses on the experiences of human-beings and provides detailed descriptions of their personal experiences (Patton, 2002). A focus group enabled and encouraged participants to speak with other educators about their experiences (Breen, 2006) with implementing play-based learning and supported the social construction of information.

I conducted the focus group using the secure video-conferencing platform, Zoom. This enabled participants to meet from a space that was comfortable and familiar to them, thus

encouraging them to engage in open dialogue. With permission from each of the participants, I video recorded the focus group through the virtual meeting platform. I also used an audio recording application on my phone as a back-up. The focus group meeting lasted just over one hour.

During the focus group, I served as the facilitator of the conversation. To aid in guiding the conversation, I employed the use of slides (Appendix G) containing the discussion points for our session. Utilizing the screen sharing feature available on the Zoom video-conferencing platform, all participants were able to view the slides. I provided an overview of the patterns, which emerged from my holistic read and line-by-line reading of the questionnaire responses and interview transcripts. Using the slides as a guide, I asked questions to encourage conversation to confirm their experiences and clarify wonderings on my part as the researcher. Since the focus group was recorded, I was able to review the recording immediately after our session ended. The goal of the member checking process was for participants to have the data back in their hands (Hahn, 2020), not only checking for accuracy, but to determine if I had adequately captured their lived experiences.

While I had questions prepared, I accurately anticipated further questions would arise once the detailed questionnaires and interviews were completed. As with the interviews, I shared the questions prior to the focus group meeting to help participants feel comfortable about the experience and to have an opportunity to gather their thoughts. To help elicit conversation, we began by introducing ourselves and our educational experiences. I found this to be helpful, especially since the participants did not know one another. I also asked the participants to share their definitions of play and play-based learning in order to offer one another clarity when referencing these topics throughout the discussion.

To begin our conversation, we discussed and reviewed responses to questions that arose from the questionnaires and interviews. A goal of the focus group was to engage in collaborative member checking (Baxter & Jack, 2008). In this process, my interpretations of the transcribed questionnaire responses and interviews data was shared with the participants, and they had an opportunity to “discuss and clarify the interpretation and contribute new or additional perspectives on the issue under study” (p. 556).

Throughout the focus group session, I asked open-ended questions designed to elicit conversation and discussion, particularly with regard to the experiences of each participant (Breen, 2006). Open-ended questions are particularly appropriate for group conversations as a means of encouraging participants to “explore the issues of importance to them, in their own vocabulary, generating their own questions and pursuing their own priorities” (Kitzinger, 1995, p. 299).

The primary aim of this focus group was to allow the educator participants to engage in dialogue with fellow kindergarten teachers, share their experiences, and ponder if and how their pedagogical beliefs aligned with the current status of play. As encouraged by Kitzinger (1995), I explained to the participants that a goal of the focus group was to support and spark conversation between one another rather than addressing me as the researcher in a strict question/answer format.

Immediately following the focus group session, I reviewed and added to my original analytic memo (Lareau, 2021) to analyze and summarize the interactions between participants, added to the profiles of participants, and noted any other key information I gathered as I facilitated this group. By video recording the focus group session, I was able to review and

describe the contexts for each participant, as well as any nonverbal communication (e.g., turning off camera, leaning back in chair, scowling at a question, laughing).

All data was organized on my password protected laptop computer, where I maintained files for each participant labeled with their code name. The files contained their individual questionnaire response, interview audio file, and transcription. I also stored the focus group video, audio back-up, and transcript, as well as coding documents in their own Focus Group file.

**Data Analysis**

In this phenomenological research study, I engaged in data analysis concurrently with the data collection (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Lareau, 2021). According to Baxter and Jack (2008), the convergence of data occurs in the analysis process of case study research, rather than handling each piece individually. As such, I explored the overall case and how each data source contributed to the whole, rather than focusing on individual parts or factors of the sources. By maintaining a focus that was both emergent and evolving, I addressed questions as they arose and remained flexible and open in my analysis as needed in order to “discover things that [were] fresh and original” (Lareau, 2021, p. 195).

***Analyzing Questionnaires, Individual Interviews, and Focus Group Session***

The analysis of this examination of the teachers’ experiences of play-based learning experiences in urban kindergarten classrooms occurred in two cycles, as outlined in Table 7.

**Table 7**

*Cycles of Data Analysis*

<b>Type of Data</b>	<b>First Cycle</b>	<b>Second Cycle</b>
Detailed Questionnaire; Individual interview transcripts, Focus group transcript	Stage 1: Holistic Coding Stage 2: Concept Coding	Stage 3: Pattern Coding Stage 4: Trinity of Concepts

**First Cycle: Holistic and Concept Coding Stages.** The first cycle of analysis had an exploratory quality and included Stage 1 (holistic coding) and Stage 2 (concept coding). The first stage of my analysis took place once the detailed questionnaires and transcriptions of the individual interviews were completed. I engaged in a holistic reading of the narrative responses to open-ended questions on the detailed questionnaire and the interview transcripts, recording in the margins of the document keywords or phrases that stood out as linking to my research questions. Holistically reading the questionnaire responses and interview transcripts supported the collaborative member checking process which took place at the start of the focus group session. I engaged in an additional holistic read after the focus group session was transcribed to encapsulate this data with the findings of the questionnaires and interviews.

In alignment with Saldaña (2016), before looking at coding “datum-by-datum” (p. 167), I invested time in reading the corpus of data to consider the bigger picture and notice broader concepts. Dey (1993) suggests the time spent on this holistic approach strengthens engagement with the data in the later stages of analysis. This stage of analysis is referred to as “macro-level” coding, as it provides opportunity to consider basic concepts suggested by reviewing the data as a whole (Saldaña, 2016).

Within the first cycle of analysis, I then engaged in a second stage focusing on line-by-line coding where I allowed for categories related to the play-based learning experiences of the teachers to emerge. Concept coding (Saldaña, 2021) involves assigning a word or short phrase to represent a “bigger picture,” offering an idea rather than a specific object or behavior (p. 152). This approach was appropriate for a study utilizing hermeneutic phenomenology, such as this study, since there were multiple participants, a variety of data types, and the study aimed to “transcend the particular participants... and to progress toward the ideas suggested by the study”

(p. 153). This inductive technique allowed for categories to emerge organically through what Saldaña (2021) refers to as a “‘learn as you go’ approach that spontaneously creates original codes the first time data are reviewed” (p. 41). Since I planned to employ two compatible first cycle coding methods, holistic coding and concept coding, I used what Saldaña (2021) terms as “eclectic coding” (p. 223) to serve both the needs of the study and the analysis of data.

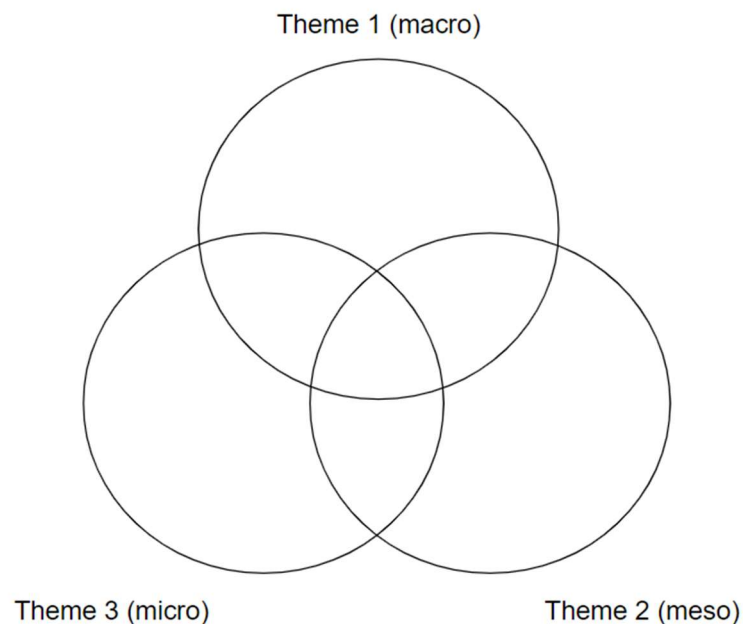
As a means of organizing the codes that emerged from the interview and focus group data, I employed two templates to aid in my scanning and pattern construction of information (Saldaña, 2021). One template (Appendix H) utilized Saldaña’s (2021) suggestion of code charting and summarized the information gathered while interacting with the participants during the interview and focus group session. The second organizational template (Appendix I) organized codes, code descriptions, and example quote(s) of code in a coding key. The coding key allowed me to see specific codes and maintain organization of direct quotes that aligned with each code.

**Second Cycle: Pattern Coding and Theme Emergence.** Once the first cycle of analysis was completed, I engaged in a second cycle of coding methods. Second cycle coding methods are considered advanced means of reorganizing and reanalyzing the data that was coded in the first cycle (Saldaña, 2021). The third stage of data analysis involved closely examining the categories that emerged in Stage 2 to identify any patterns amongst the study participants. Specifically, in Stage 3, I engaged in pattern coding (Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2021). Pattern coding is a cumulative coding method that attempts to synthesize and group the summaries obtained during the first cycle of coding into condensed categories, concepts, or themes (Saldaña, 2021).

The fourth stage of analysis was the examination of data to reveal themes across the data sources and participants. To do this, I enlisted the “trinity of concepts” method, as described by Soklaridis (2009). In this method, I identified three major codes, themes, or categories that struck me as the researcher and appeared to stand out in the inquiry. A visual that may support this method is a Venn diagram with three overlapping circles (Figure 5). The overlapping areas indicate shared properties or attributes between categories or themes (Saldaña, 2021) and the framework itself organizes the interrelated factors which operate at micro, meso, and macro levels (Soklaridis, 2009).

**Figure 5**

*A Trinity of Concepts Venn Diagram*



*Note:* Adapted from Soklaridis (2009).

Through this analysis, I was committed to translating a complex phenomenon into a text the reader could comprehend (Baxter & Jack, 2008). According to van Manen (1997), “A good phenomenological text has the effect of making us suddenly ‘see’ something in a manner that

enriches our understanding of everyday life experience” (p. 345). Therefore, my goal in this analysis was to describe my inquiry, specifically the context and the phenomenon, comprehensively and with such detail that the reader of my study will feel as though they were not only an active participant, but also could determine if the findings could translate to their individual situations (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

### **Study Rigor**

According to Ajjawi and Higgs (2007), in order for the product of qualitative research to be credible, the process must be rigorous, thus “rigor and credibility go hand in hand” (p. 631). In this qualitative examination into the experiences of kindergarten teachers with implementing play-based learning in urban school settings, I employed a number of strategies to ensure this inquiry’s validity, credibility, and reliability. Together, such assurances supported a study that is considered rigorous with results that can be deemed dependable.

### ***Validity, Credibility, and Reliability***

**Validity.** In qualitative research, validity strategies are used to demonstrate the accuracy of findings and to convince readers of such accuracy of information (Creswell, 2014). These procedures might include member checking and triangulation of data sources (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Creswell, 2014). Specifically, I employed the use of triangulation to strengthen this inquiry. Gathering information through the use of detailed questionnaires, interviews, and a focus group supported the credibility of my findings. Triangulation allowed for opportunities to cross-check data and ensure accurate representation of the experiences of the participants. Triangulation of data collection, coupled with collaborative member checking of codes and sub-themes enhanced the validity of this study.

In order to ensure the validity of this study, I employed the use of audio recording to capture the interviews and video recording for the focus group. This data was transcribed using Otter.ai software. The transcription information, in addition to the detailed questionnaire, were coded to note the emergence of themes across settings using Delve qualitative data analysis software. Triangulating the coding of information across sources through Otter.ai transcriptions, coding through Delve, and member-checking of findings further strengthened the validity of this inquiry.

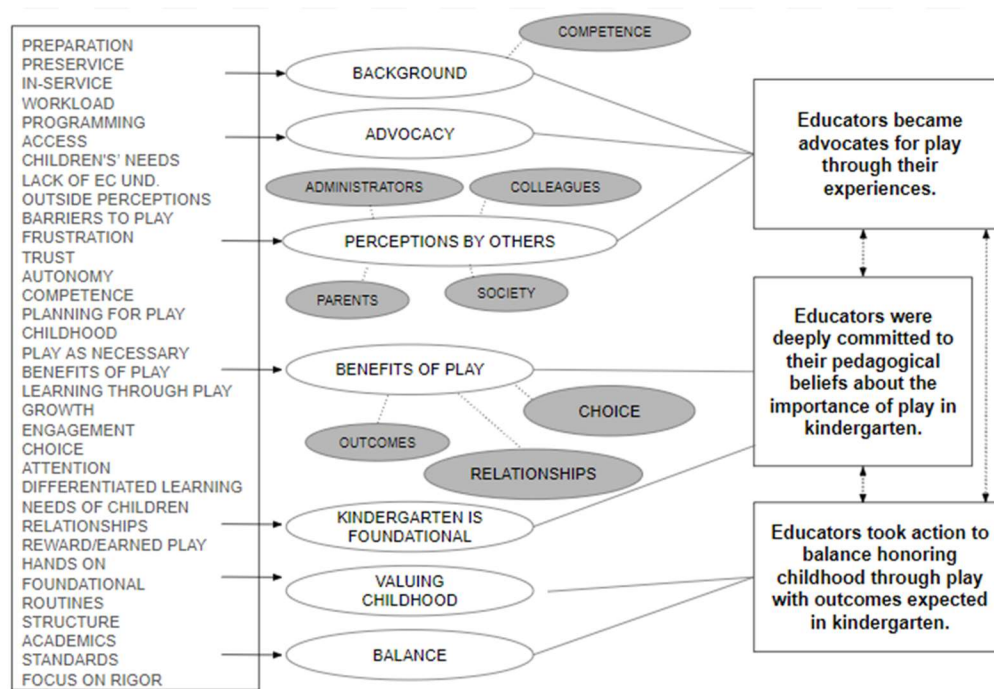
Additionally, providing thick descriptions of settings, captured through my analytic memos and review of transcripts, strengthened the findings of this qualitative research study. In order to provide a level of trustworthiness to my reader, I ensured enough detail to enable readers to assess validity and credibility (Baxter & Jack, 2008). As a researcher, I acknowledge my positionality may be reflected in the interpretation of results and therefore, I discuss both positive and negative evidence of themes that emerge.

**Credibility.** The detailed questionnaire, interview, and focus group were transcribed using Otter.ai software and coded using a computer-based qualitative coding program, Delve, to determine overarching themes and occurrences. To ensure that the information was accurate, I conducted member-checking during the focus group to verify the findings that were emerging in the data. Additional follow-up questioning and clarification were utilized as needed to ensure the accuracy of the information collected. The use of multiple sources of data enhanced the credibility of this inquiry (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Patton, 1990; Yin, 2003). By using several methods of data collection and verifying that information throughout the process, I was able to note distinguishable patterns and improve the credibility of my findings (Stahl & King, 2020), which were considered within the lens of the research questions and theoretical frameworks.

Another means of ensuring study rigor and credibility was code mapping. Code mapping occurs when codes are mapped out in a dynamic and fluid process. This process allowed for changes, continuous reorganization, and the ability to progress “through iterations of analysis” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 218). Converging the data in my analysis can be likened to putting together the pieces of a puzzle or braiding strands of information together, culminating in a greater understanding of the phenomenon as a whole (Baxter & Jack, 2008). My iteration of a codes-to-findings visual is displayed in Figure 6.

**Figure 6**

*Codes-to-Findings Visual*



*Note:* Adapted from Saldaña (2016).

Beginning on the far left, I listed the codes that emerged through my analysis of the detailed questionnaires, interview transcripts, and focus group transcript. From there, I grouped the codes into categories (white ovals) and sub-categories (gray ovals). This exercise led me to my findings, which are listed on the right. The bi-directional arrows between the findings imply

they are connected, as the findings do not stand alone, but rather are built from and progress through one another. For example, educators became advocates because they were committed to their pedagogical beliefs and honored childhood. They honored childhood because of their experiences, which contributed to their developing their pedagogical beliefs about play.

**Reliability.** In qualitative research, reliability suggests a level of consistency within and between researchers and projects (Creswell, 2014). While there were aspects of this inquiry that have the potential to be replicated, such as the process and structure, the individual experiences, in their specific contexts, with a variety of influences (e.g., pressure from administrators, classroom dynamics, expectations from parents) can change from year to year or even within a given school year. Therefore, the participants in this study were unique individuals working in distinct spaces that offer perspectives from their own realities (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). These realities may not be replicated again in a repeated study, even if the participants teach the same grade level in the same classroom with the same administrators. While replication of this inquiry is not expected, this study's findings, conclusions, and recommendations may still be beneficial to the early childhood and urban education communities.

### **Limitations**

As the researcher, I acknowledge there are a number of limitations to this study. First of all, a sample of three participants provided a very limited sample and cannot be generalized to the population at large. Having participants from urban school settings and not including suburban or rural environments provided only one context for this research and does not offer comparisons within and between a large number of schools. Additionally, interacting with teachers through questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups relied on them to relay information and did not allow me to observe the classroom environment firsthand. The study was also

dependent upon the willingness of participants to share information, to fully disclose their experiences, and to accurately recall situations.

A study of educators' perceptions of implementing play-based learning in urban school settings such as this did not include the valuable perspectives of young learners. How a child perceives school throughout their formative years may have implications on their feelings about education for years to come.

Logistically, the time restraints of this inquiry due to this being dissertation research did not allow for a thorough encapsulation of the experiences of early childhood teachers and the long-term outcomes of instructional decisions.

## **Ethics**

According to Creswell (2014), it is important for researchers to “to engage in ethical practices and to anticipate the ethical issues prior to the study that will likely arise” (p. 114). As the researcher, I completed IRB training and referred back to the resources from the course, as needed, specifically those that were relevant to this research. This study was approved by the IRB at my university.

I provided informed consent to my participants and did not encourage or persuade anyone to take part in the project against their will or under false pretenses. I was transparent with the purpose of my research, what information would be shared, how I would protect the personal information of the participants, and my methods for data collection and storage. It was my responsibility as the researcher to maintain confidential records of identifying information on a password protected computer. In the interview process and focus group session, I was forthcoming in the intentions, sought permission prior to recording the interviews and was transparent about the recording of the focus group, and assured anonymity of the participants as

well as any identifying information. It was crucial that I received explicit permission from each participant for each step in the process (Lareau, 2021).

It is noted, however, that since a phenomenological approach describes the experiences of individuals with a particular phenomenon, there is a risk of unintentionally revealing the identity of a participant or participants in the process of providing rich descriptions and details due to the uniqueness of the individual perspective (Huynh et al., 2021). With this in mind, I committed to encapsulating the essences of the experiences while honoring the privacy and confidentiality of the participants within the trusted space of this research.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this inquiry was to explore the experiences of educators with implementing play-based learning in urban kindergarten classrooms. A qualitative, phenomenological case study design allowed me, as the researcher, to understand the lived experiences of each participant within their individual contexts. Detailed questionnaires, individual interviews, and a focus group provided rich data, which was analyzed in four stages to determine overarching themes and findings, which will be discussed at length in Chapter 4, followed by a comprehensive discussion in Chapter 5.

## Chapter Four: Findings

The purpose of this inquiry was to understand educators' experiences with play-based learning in urban kindergarten classrooms. The intent was to determine what pedagogical beliefs the educators held with regard to play, the extent to which they incorporated play-based learning in their classrooms, and the alignments and/or tensions that existed between the educators and the schools in which they were employed.

Within this chapter, I share key findings and analyses of data collected through a detailed questionnaire, individual interviews, and a focus group session. The approaches to obtaining and analyzing data for this study were guided by the primary research question: What are the experiences of educators regarding the role of play-based learning in urban kindergarten classrooms? This primary question was supported by the following subquestions:

1. How do educators define play within a classroom context?
2. What are the pedagogical beliefs of kindergarten educators regarding play-based learning?
3. In what ways, if any, are kindergarten educators incorporating play-based learning experiences into their classrooms and ensuring access to each child?
4. What alignments and/or tensions exist between the pedagogical beliefs of educators regarding play-based learning and the initiatives and directives of the school district in which they are employed?

The primary question and four sub-questions formed the grounding for this phenomenological case study.

The first part of this chapter lays the groundwork for interpreting the findings. Beginning with the individual teacher's definitions of play, I discuss the responses to the detailed

questionnaire, which launched this inquiry for each participant. Collectively the questionnaire, interview responses, and focus group conversation serve as a backdrop to the findings.

### Teachers’ Definitions and Perceptions of Play

As a framework for presenting the findings, I first provide the definitions and descriptions of *play* from the perspectives of the participants. The inclusion of the participants’ definitions ensures clarity of their use of the term and concept of *play* throughout my analysis. The patterns that emerged within and across participant responses are relevant to the findings of this study, as the term *play* is used frequently throughout this chapter. In Table 8, I present the voices of the participants as they defined and detailed their perceptions of play in their individual interview and focus group session.

**Table 8**

*Participant Definitions and Descriptions of Play*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Definition/Description of Play</b>
Camille	“I view play as just hands on activities... If we can have activities that are student driven, it allows kids to feel safe to play... I feel like learning in general has to be playing with how your brain works, and how to make things happen. It's not necessarily always fun, but you have to be willing to take risks, you have to be able to take the time to manipulate things, so that you can feel successful in your tasks... There's the definite play time where kids are having their free choice to build and take their learning to different levels based upon the materials that are put out there. There's always a little bit of manipulation on my part of what I change the housekeeping area to be, or there's always a little bit to guide them in certain directions. But I feel like it [play] is woven throughout the entire day in the choices that we make or activities.”
Audrey	“I think [play is] a child's first introduction to learning on a lot of levels. They're discovering through play, and through social interactions, and just discovering the world around them... I think they can build their academic learning off of and through play and [learn to] work with others, and just having those conversations and using their imaginations and discovering the world around them.”
Lauren	“I believe littles* learn best when they can manipulate and use their hands and their creative minds and space to develop academics. I believe they go hand in hand. I think when children become curious and passionate, that's a big takeaway for them for learning. I am a strong believer in [play].”

---

(\*A term used to describe the children in her classroom, having its essence in a culture of caring and nurturing.)

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While the participants had some overlapping ideas about play, no two participants had exactly the same ideas about play in the urban kindergarten classrooms of young children. As I discussed in Chapter Two, play and play-based learning are challenging to succinctly define (Allee-Herndon et al., 2021; Bodrova et al., 2013; Guirguis, 2018; Khalil et al., 2022; Miller & Almon, 2009; Yogman et al., 2018) due to the myriad perspectives. A composite theme (i.e., definition) offered by the participants, however, was the following: the ability for children to explore, express creativity, use their imaginations, and discover the world around them. This theme aligns with the definitions offered by scholars, who posit play involves active engagement (Garvey, 1990; Stremmel et al., 2019; Yogman et al., 2018), supports natural curiosity (Binnendyk, 2022), encourages the cultivation of a joy for learning (Yogman et al., 2018), and is characterized by exploration and experimentation (Edwards, 2017; Nontell, 2021). The participants' definitions and descriptions of play are the grounding from which the other forms of data were analyzed.

A launching point for this inquiry on teachers' play-based experiences was the detailed questionnaire. The questionnaire provided me with an abbreviated understanding of the backgrounds and pedagogical beliefs the participants held regarding kindergarten contexts and educating young children. In the presentation of the questionnaire findings, I used a color-coding system to represent the level of the responses as a way to visually compare the teachers' responses to one another. This coding guided me in seeing the emergence of consensus, as well as the illumination of differences between the teachers' beliefs about play. I chose blue as the color to represent strong agreement and green to represent agreement. Orange represents

disagreement, and red represents a firm, strong disagreement. Table 9 illustrates the teachers' responses to the Likert scale questions on beliefs about kindergarten and play.

**Table 9**

*Participants' Beliefs About Kindergarten and Play*

	<b>Camille</b>	<b>Audrey</b>	<b>Lauren</b>
I believe kindergarten should be highly structured with rigid routines and schedules.	Agree	Disagree	Agree
I believe kindergarten should be academic focused.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree
Play should be earned or rewarded for "good" behavior.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Play should be experienced each day for a minimum amount of time.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree
Play should be incorporated into the learning environment	Strongly Agree	Strongly Agree	Strongly Agree
Standardization is necessary so all children leave kindergarten with the same expectations.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree
The purpose of kindergarten is to learn how to "do" school.	Agree	Disagree	Disagree

The first two statements on the detailed questionnaire sought participants' insights on the need for kindergarten to be highly structured, particularly in the areas of routines and schedules, and the need for kindergarten to be focused on academics. In their responses to the first prompt, Camille and Lauren agreed, stating in their rationales that routines and schedules help children to feel safe, secure, and comfortable in the kindergarten classroom setting. While Audrey indicated she disagreed with the statement on the Likert scale, her rationale stated that she somewhat agreed, and that there should be a consistent routine and schedule to guide children's learning and to provide them with a familiar and safe environment. Her written response was similar to those of Camille and Lauren.

Lauren and Audrey disagreed with the statement on the belief that academics should be the focus in kindergarten, while Camille indicated she strongly disagreed. Audrey shared that

while there should be some academic focus with literacy and math, children are at an age where they are still developing, and their learning should be “encouraged through play interactions” as well as academic learning. Lauren emphasized there was a need for flexibility to respond to what learners are excited about and engaged in, and there is space for academics as well as play. On a similar note, Camille argued that “flexibility within lessons make for magical learning opportunities.”

Both Audrey and Lauren mentioned the use of *Lucy Calkins Units of Study for Teaching Reading* (Calkins, 2015a) and *Lucy Calkins Units of Study for Teaching Writing* (Calkins, 2015b). Audrey also used the phonics component of that program (Calkins, 2022). In reviewing the kindergarten overviews, study guides, and recommendations for materials, the reading program included song lyrics, aspects of partner reading, suggested fingertip flashlights to help with pointing, had a “Super Readers” theme with super reading powers, incorporated nursery rhymes, and introduced “Reading Playdates” where children could “Play School, Play Games, or Play Pretend.”

The writing program suggested that children make signs or write a song in their persuasive writing unit and encouraged “active engagement” through the delivery of the mini-lessons by trying out a new strategy on their own work or a teacher’s demonstration text. The phonics cards were brightly colored and included kid-like drawings and illustrations. The reading and writing sets each contained four units with 17-18 lessons in each unit for reading and 19-20 lessons per unit in writing. The sets also contained additional program items, such as an “If... Then...” curriculum and units available for purchase. The suggested scope and sequence for reading, writing, and phonics covered the course of the entire school year. Camille’s district utilized *Into Reading* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt [HMH], 2024) as their reading and writing

program. According to the program website, the approach of *Into Reading* is to “Play and develop a love of school” through programs “built upon proven research but designed for fun” (HMH, 2024).

All three participants shared their district’s adoption of math programs, with Audrey’s school using *Zearn* (Zearn, 2024), Lauren’s district utilizing *My Math* (McGraw Hill, 2024), and Camille’s district using *enVision Math* (Savvas Learning Company, 2024). All three programs tout aspects of “exploration,” “collaboration,” and encouraged the use of “manipulatives,” in their online overviews and program descriptions. The math programs also suggested the additional purchase of computer-based programs/games, manipulatives, and/or learning station kits.

The three participants also disagreed or strongly disagreed with the idea of play being earned or rewarded, as well as play being experienced for a minimum amount of time each day. They all strongly agreed that play should be organically incorporated into the learning environment. Audrey noted that play should be integrated daily in kindergarten, as play supports creativity and social interactions. She believes there should be a balance with instructional and academic learning, and that play should be an “essential” part of the day. Lauren argued, learners should have “opportunities to learn and grow through hands-on play.” She stated, “Play helps learners develop relationships, make connections, and find joy in learning.” The three participant responses to these statements aligned with their definitions of play, specifically connecting to ideas of play integration, hands-on discovery, exploration, social interactions, and fostering curiosity and creativity.

The final statements in this section offered a variety of responses by participants. As to the need for standardization in kindergarten, Camille strongly disagreed, explaining that children

have their own learning path and need to be viewed as individuals in order to help them be successful in their own ways. She also shared that children need to be appropriately challenged (socially, academically, etc.) in order to feel successful. Audrey disagreed with the questionnaire's standardization statement, rationalizing that while the standards are necessary with regard to expectations for what children need to know upon entering first grade, children learn at different rates and do not perform the same way as they "strive to reach their full potential." Lauren agreed with the statement on standardization, saying that standardization is necessary, but "kindergarten should be child-centered, hands-on play, and developmentally appropriate to meet the needs of all learners."

The final statement in this section of the questionnaire asked the educators to rate their beliefs regarding the purpose of kindergarten and the notion that it aims to teach children how to "do" school. Camille agreed with this statement, discussing kindergarten as the setting of a foundation, and how it is difficult for children to learn if they do not know how to "do" school. Audrey shared that kindergarten is where "learning and hopefully joy for learning begins" and as a foundation, expands upon the "curiosity and discovery children already have for the world around them." She noted her belief that "kindergarten begins our life-long learning and is where children explore and expand on their curiosities to learn." Lauren echoed these rationales, discussing how kindergarten experiences give children confidence for future success and learning how to "do" school occurs through classroom community and expectations. Lauren stated, "I believe the purpose of kindergarten is to explore and grow academically, socially, and emotionally through play-based learning." A common theme throughout the rationales of the three participants is the foundational aspect of kindergarten that sets children up for future learning.

The questionnaire also sought to learn about the educators’ ability to exercise autonomy as a kindergarten teacher. Table 10 summarizes the responses to the Likert scale questions related to teacher autonomy. In this set of responses, I represented green as the higher level of autonomy. Orange was used as an illustration of mid-level autonomy, and red described the lowest level of autonomy in the responses. None of the participants indicated full (blue) autonomy in their role as kindergarten teachers.

**Table 10**

*Participants’ Ability to Exercise Autonomy in the Classroom*

<b>As a kindergarten teacher, to what extent were you able to...</b>				
<b>1 = not at all/minimal</b>	<b>4 = full</b>	<b>Camille</b>	<b>Audrey</b>	<b>Lauren</b>
...exercise autonomy over instructional decisions.		3	3	1
...determine your daily schedule.		3	3	1
...make adjustments to your scope and sequence.		3	3	1
...decide how concepts are/were taught.		2	3	1

In response to these statements on autonomy over instructional decisions, scheduling, scope and sequence, and how concepts were taught, Camille and Audrey had identical responses with the exception of one. Audrey felt slightly more autonomy than Camille regarding the way concepts were taught. In her rationale, Camille stated that she does not negotiate the standards for learning but has been able to be flexible on how the standards are met and has been “fortunate” to be trusted as a professional by her administrators. In her interview, Camille explained,

[My] district wants [teachers] to teach [programs] with fidelity, following their pacing guides. Their pacing guides are not appropriate, nor are they hands on, play based, any of that. So, what I've done is I've taken, especially the reading curriculum, I have taken it

and dissected it. And now teach the books more thematically, so that I can work in some play into those books and that structure.

Audrey shared that throughout the time at her current school, she has had a range of autonomy and has been able to support curricular resources with additional activities. In contrast to Camille and Audrey, Lauren strongly disagreed with all statements regarding instructional decisions, autonomy, scheduling, and scope and sequence, describing the daily schedule as “rigid.” She shared that her principal made all classroom schedules and provided all materials. According to Lauren, the scope and sequence and ability to make adjustments were limited, as the teachers in her building had schedules that were “packed” and expectations to “get through every page in a lesson.”

Additionally, the data collected through the questionnaire provided an opportunity to look at the educators’ perceptions of implementing play-based learning experiences into their classroom settings (see Table 11). As in Table 9, I chose blue as the color to represent strong agreement and green to represent agreement. Orange represents disagreement, and red represents a firm, strong disagreement.

**Table 11**

*Perceptions of Classroom Play*

<b>In your classroom...</b>	<b>Camille</b>	<b>Audrey</b>	<b>Lauren</b>
<b>1 = not at all/minimal      4 = full</b>			
...you are/were able to incorporate play-based learning experiences into the school day.	Strongly Agree	Strongly Agree	Disagree
...play-time, choice time, recess is/was used as a reward.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree
...the ability for learners to play depends/depended on their behavior	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree

As demonstrated in Table 11, Camille and Audrey strongly agreed with having the ability to incorporate play-based learning experiences into the school day, which aligned with their

previous responses to having autonomy over instructional decisions and scheduling. Camille stated, “Play/recess is a right, not a privilege.” and noted behavior is not part of access to play in her classroom. She emphatically explained, “Most of the time students who need the most redirections are students that need more opportunities to practice social skills, not less.”

Audrey shared that while play-based learning has always had a place in her classroom, it has lessened due to scheduling, and play is not used as a reward, “as it is a part of a child's learning, development and socialization experiences.” Audrey noted, however, that “sometimes behavioral choices affect play time if children need multiple reminders/redirections,” as she believes “it is age appropriate and developmentally appropriate time to rethink choices and regain play” by reteaching expectations.

Because of the rigidity of Lauren’s daily schedule, there were “limited opportunities for playtime and choice time” in her urban kindergarten classroom, as indicated by her response to the question about incorporating play. Lauren indicated “agree” for play, choice-time, and recess being used as a reward because it was used as an all-school incentive when the principal determined the children had “earned” play in some way (i.e., referral slips were down, behaviors in certain areas of the building had improved). Lauren concluded her questionnaire by saying, “When time did allow for learners to use their imagination and be creative, we loved seeing them grow as a community.”

The questionnaire served as a backdrop to the interviews and focus group session, which enabled participants to expand upon their experiences, backgrounds, and pedagogical beliefs in greater detail. The analysis of these combined research activities led to the emergence of three findings for this inquiry: a) through their experiences, educators developed orientations as advocates for play; b) educators were deeply committed to their pedagogical beliefs about the

importance of play and the foundations of kindergarten; and c) educators took action to balance honoring of childhood through play with outcomes expected in kindergarten. The remaining sections of this chapter provide detailed descriptions of the findings bolstered by the voices of the participants.

### **Finding 1: Educators Became Advocates for Play Through Their Experiences**

Throughout this study on educators and their ability to implement play-based learning in urban kindergarten classrooms, I learned that through their experiences, teachers developed orientations as advocates for play. The educators in this study described how their teacher education programs, pre-service field experiences, and early in-service teaching positions influenced their pedagogical stances on play-based learning and competence in their roles as early childhood professionals. Stemming from these foundational experiences, participants advocated for, implemented, and in some cases, defended the inclusion of play in their classrooms to varying degrees. In addition, all three of the educators were impacted by the perceptions of others (i.e., administrators, colleagues, parents, and community members outside the education arena).

#### ***Teacher Education Experiences***

Camille, Audrey, and Lauren attended four-year universities and obtained degrees in education. While all three participants graduated from college in the early- to mid- 2000s, they each shared what they could remember of their preparation programs and how those experiences transferred to the school setting. Audrey and Lauren stated that while education coursework supported their understanding of curriculum and planning for and delivery of instruction, they believed that firsthand classroom experience had the most significant impact. Even then, Audrey

noted, “until you actually get into [teaching], you don’t know the depths of what you’re getting into.” Lauren shared,

I don't think any teaching experience really prepares you until you student teach, until you're in it and understand the day-to-day routine, the relationship building, and the role that the teacher has for every individual child. [These aspects] can't be taught until you are truly in that position.

Camille also felt the university program prepared her for curriculum implementation but lacked other important components. She stated, “[I] did not feel prepared in behavior management, mental health, trauma, all of those things,” and therefore, “[my] first couple years were a really big learning curve in that direction.” She continued,

I do remember in one class, one of the teachers said, "If you have a really well-planned lesson, you won't have behavior problems." And that stuck with me for a really long time, because there's so much more that goes into [teaching] than just a well-planned lesson.

Camille highlighted the multicultural foundations courses she had as part of her university program, which helped her to better understand, support, and teach learners from diverse backgrounds. She praised,

Not every school would have given me those multicultural foundations... being a white woman walking into a classroom of 99% African American students and being able to handle that in a way that was appropriate... huge, huge pluses.

In addition to multicultural foundations, Camille also shared the emphasis and importance placed on play-based learning in her education coursework. This was echoed by Audrey, who stated that a big component of her coursework was “early childhood education and the importance of play-based learning and incorporating it into the classroom.”

However, learning that play-based approaches were important did not always transfer to in-service teaching positions. Camille described the “big difference” between her coursework and her first teaching position as a kindergarten teacher in an urban school setting,

[In my pre-service teaching], I was being taught that play-based learning was so important. I worked at the Education Center for Children [on my university campus], and everything was play-based. And then I got into the schools, and it was very much like, we don't have time to play. It was a no-no, but it was also the early 2000s. No Child Left Behind had just been put into effect, everybody was scrambling to get their test scores up.

Teacher preparation experiences such as those described by Camille, Audrey, and Lauren built their understanding of effective early childhood teaching practices and developed their pedagogical beliefs about play (i.e., orientations as advocates, orientations impacted by other perceptions) as they embarked on their careers.

### ***Developing Orientations Through Teacher Induction Experiences***

Equipped with the knowledge and experiences obtained in their early childhood education courses, Camille, Audrey, and Lauren have worked in various capacities over the past two decades, specifically in four-year old kindergarten (4K/K4), five-year old kindergarten (5K/K5), 1st grade, 2nd grade, 3rd grade, and multi-age classrooms. As seasoned professionals, they have found themselves in different climates of trust and autonomy over the years, leading them to advocate for the needs of young children by leaning on their backgrounds and foundational pedagogical beliefs to incorporate play-based learning experiences and navigate the accountability and standardized systems within their school and district environments.

In Lauren's first professional teaching position, her excitement for obtaining her role as a 4K educator soon shifted as she learned about the programming she would be expected to deliver to her 32 students, none of whom spoke English. Lauren described her induction into teaching,

My first true experience on my own was Direct Instruction, so the opportunity for those littles to play and socialize was very limited for them, as well as for me to expose them to [play]. When I was hired by my principal, I was so excited because I couldn't believe I actually landed a job in something I was passionate about. I had no idea [the children] didn't speak English. When I got there on my first day of school, I realized that they were looking at me and not understanding and crying. I knew I had to take a step back and model physically [with] my body what I needed from them.

Although Lauren did not identify as a teacher of young English language learners, she innately knew she needed to apply other teaching strategies. She realized the reason Direct Instruction (DI) was being implemented was a result of the school's decision to use the DI approach, despite existing scholarship (Escamilla et al., 2014; García & Wei, 2014) that concludes otherwise.

Lauren added,

It was just teaching them the English language. So, I say the word, they say the word, it's very repetitive. It's very structured... I was not mentally prepared for [Direct Instruction].

And it was just something that I took day to day.

When asked about incorporating opportunities for hands-on learning in her K4 classroom, Lauren described her first year and the rigidity that was expected of her through DI (i.e., minutes met, frequent coaching, critique, and feedback). In her second year, Lauren took it upon herself to implement the DI lessons through a more play-centered approach. She explained, "I did the lessons, but I implemented centers where they could use playdough, they could use sand, they

could use the paint inside a bag to make the letter as opposed to just pencil/paper.” Lauren felt she needed to comply with the expectations of DI to make the school leadership feel comfortable with how she delivered the lessons. Because of her beliefs about the importance of play, Lauren found a way to navigate the DI landscape while negotiating spaces for play.

After teaching 4K for two years and 3rd grade for seven years, Lauren was offered a K4/K5 multi-age teaching position in a large public school district located in an adjacent school district. Hopeful that moving to a different school would provide new opportunities for her as an educator, Lauren was surprised to find herself once again experiencing tension between her pedagogical beliefs and feeling trusted as an early childhood educator by her school administration. Lauren described how her principal claimed to express openness to different techniques of teaching and learning, so Lauren approached her about play-based learning. However, when the principal came into Lauren’s classroom to observe play in action, she responded, “It just seems messy. They’re just playing.” Lauren and her teaching partner felt like they had hit “a brick wall” and that “there wasn’t going to be change. [The principal] wasn’t going to allow for that change.”

Lauren specifically recalled an incident with her principal, describing a time when she and her teaching partner were “caught” doing play-based learning. Teaching a how-to writing unit, she and her colleague had a play center set up so the children could actively experience the steps of an activity, such as wrapping a gift, building a sandcastle, and baking a cake that would support them in expressing their experiences in writing. Lauren’s principal came into the room for an unannounced observation, sat down with her computer, and took notes. Lauren described the encounter,

[After] she left, she pulled [my teaching partner and I] in for a meeting during our lunch and told us that [the play center] wasn't developmentally acceptable during that time. She made us close that play station, and she removed the things that we brought in from it. She said that [children] need to be writers, not playing. We were trying to say that exposure to this play was important because not everybody got the chance to touch sand. Not everybody learns how to wrap a gift with their mama, not everybody learns to do certain things, bake a cake, or put the flour in the cup.

Despite Lauren and her colleague's advocacy for play, the principal still responded, "That's not what's important. What's important is pencil to the paper." Lauren shared they had to "eliminate" any remnants of the play center and her principal came in frequently to ensure it was in fact removed.

When asked how that experience made Lauren and her teaching partner feel, she described their feelings as "upset," "frustrated," and "emotional." She explained, "We always want[ed] to give children the opportunity to learn in different ways, in a variety of ways. And you want to make sure that their [school] experience is enjoyable, not stressful." Lauren continued, stating, "We're taught every child should have voice and choice. But yet, in the district I worked in, our voices were not heard, and our choices weren't an option. Unfortunately, play was looked down on... play was stopped."

While Lauren faced a roadblock in implementing play in the form of her administrator, Camille began her career with expectations from the district to raise test scores in the wake of No Child Left Behind. Camille explained how this approach resulted in minimal time or opportunities for play in her urban kindergarten classroom. She discussed her first experience as a kindergarten teacher at an urban public elementary school, which was part of a large school

district. Because her school had federal SAGE funding, Camille shared a classroom of 30 students with one other teacher, as SAGE schools were provided funding for a 15:1 or 30:2 student to teacher ratio. The program, which began to be phased out in 2015, stood for Student Achievement Guarantee in Education, and it aimed to “encourage achievement through lower class sizes” (Schossow, 2015, para. 3). Camille reflected,

I remember walking in, it was kindergarten, and there were no play areas. What [the teachers] called playtime—they'd have it about once a week—they'd just bring out buckets of toys and put them on the table and that was considered playtime. I was like, this isn't playtime. I remember [thinking], I gotta change this, I gotta figure it out.

Similar to Lauren, Camille felt that she had to navigate being a first-year teacher with what she believed learners should experience in kindergarten. She remembered “not wanting to make waves and not cause too much of a stir.” She said she “had to get [her] foot in the door and feel the way to try to give the kids the experience that [she] knew was really important.” Camille praised her university experience for providing her with the “voice and the knowledge to know [play] was important.”

Recognizing the importance of play and holding firm to her beliefs, Camille’s first teaching experience sparked her advocacy for play, as she “fought” to make connections with other educators around play-based learning. She recalled,

I feel like I had to stand up and fight for [play] more than other people did, but I believed in it, and nobody could argue with my progress. It feels like I always back up my claims with the data because we're a data focused career. I understand the importance for that. I could always say, “Okay, you want me to teach it this way. But I've done it this way and

look at the results.” So, I kind of established that for myself, especially at Hillcrest, where people didn't question me. In fact, if anything, they came in and watched.

Camille articulated her confidence in her beliefs about play and her competence as an early childhood educator, stating, “When it comes down to it, this is what I know is best for kids. I'm not going to do anything different than that. It is what it is.”

Audrey echoed Camille's competence and confidence in relation to her understanding of children and what they need to develop as learners. She asserted, “As kindergarten teachers or early childhood teachers, we know our kids best, and we know what's developmentally appropriate for a four- or five-year-old to expect them to do.”

Audrey began her career as a substitute teacher, mostly in the primary grades, after graduating in December from her university program. After a few months of serving as a substitute teacher, Audrey embarked on a “short-term study abroad experience in northern Spain to meet [her] minor in Spanish requirements/certification. [She] had a chance to visit Spanish schools and observe their teaching and become immersed in some of what their education looked like.” Upon returning to the U.S., Audrey returned to substitute teaching and had opportunities to experience elementary and middle school age groups. Her subbing experiences enabled Audrey to “learn some of the methods and curricula used, [experience] a typical school day... learn teaching styles, and [see] classroom set ups.” She reflected,

The one thing I learned with subbing is that it was hard always walking into someone else's classroom and not having my own. I also learned that I really liked working with and teaching younger children, so I returned to school to get my early childhood certification.

With an “extremely competitive” job market in education at the time, Audrey found seeking a position to be “rather discouraging on so many levels, especially since [she] knew [she] always wanted to teach and be a teacher.” For her first professional kindergarten teaching position at a local charter school, Audrey was “hired in late September after enrollment count and they needed to open a new kindergarten classroom. [She] was so excited and nervous at the same time.”

Audrey felt support from the two other teachers on her kindergarten team, and together “[they] integrated play into the school day and [she] saw so many benefits.” After being reassigned to teach second grade for a few years due to enrollment changes, Audrey “moved [back] to kindergarten and the kindergarten grade level is where [she has] been teaching and feeling at [her] best [ever since].” Reflecting on her experiences with play during her first years as an educator, Audrey shared,

I have been through many different curricular programs at the kindergarten level and some years, play was not as heavily integrated/implemented at the K5 level due to so many curriculum requirements. I felt I was teaching a different grade level and play was not really encouraged as much. I would add play to center times to give my students a chance to still have that play time in their day, but it wasn't as much as I would have liked in my first years of teaching.

After five years teaching at that charter school, Audrey moved to Hungary for two years where she taught the preschool/kindergarten age levels and “loved every minute of it.” She explained, “Play was highly valued and a huge part of the school day. Kids interacted and although most spoke some English, many did not, so it was immersing cultures and learning through play, which was absolutely wonderful.” When she returned from Hungary, Audrey was

offered the opportunity to return to her former school and kindergarten position. However, Audrey opted to seek a position elsewhere. She explained,

I needed and wanted a change and more opportunity to integrate play in my classroom. I interviewed with my current school and was very drawn to the multi-age, play-based learning and character education. The experiences I have had teaching K4/K5 here have been very much what I envisioned in kindergarten, next to my experience teaching abroad.

Audrey felt “privileged” to teach with fellow kindergarten colleagues who also “valued play and its importance at the kindergarten level.” Collaboratively, they developed their own curriculum where they were able to integrate play throughout the school day. Audrey shared, “We all saw and knew the value and importance of play. I feel that went back to all of our experiences in our early childhood programs.” Audrey and her team utilized their developed curriculum until the school formally adopted *Lucy Calkins Units of Study* (Calkins, 2015a, 2015b, 2022).

Voicing their knowledge of early childhood instruction and a desire to give children ample opportunities for play in their kindergarten classrooms, Lauren, Audrey, and Camille experienced successes and challenges as they navigated their roles as teachers. A common thread among the participants was their passion for play-based learning and competence as educators, their ability to voice and advocate for play, and how perceptions about play by others impacted their ability to make instructional decisions in their urban kindergarten classrooms.

### ***Orientations Impacted by Others’ Perceptions of Play***

Throughout this study, I learned that the educators' ability to implement play-based learning depended on their level of perceived trust and autonomy given by administration,

leading them to advocate for and attempt to implement play-based learning in their classrooms. Feeling trusted to make decisions about classroom instruction varied amongst the three participants, especially with regard to having the ability to implement play-based learning in their urban kindergarten classrooms and providing access to developmentally appropriate instruction for all learners. Their orientations as advocates for play were often shaped through their exposure to other perspectives, such as administrative perspectives and those perspectives from the broader community, referred to by Audrey as “outsiders” (i.e., other teachers, parents of students, people outside the field of education).

**Perceptions of Play by Administration.** Sharing their experiences as early childhood educators, Audrey, Lauren, and Camille described varying degrees of perceived trust by administration. Since administrators are largely responsible for the day-to-day decisions in a school building and can play a significant role in the climate and culture of a school building, these feelings of trust influenced the educators’ ability to implement play-based learning. Levels of feeling trusted by administration, having the autonomy to make instructional decisions, and deliver developmentally appropriate instruction were articulated by the teachers throughout this inquiry.

Audrey shared that while she experienced some administrators in the past who did not value play, having a principal that valued play and had the background knowledge of early childhood made her feel both supported and wishful that other educators would have such an understanding. Audrey reflected that while she has worked for administrators who did not value play, one principal in particular left a lasting impression on her. While observing the classroom, the principal stood at the back counter and took in the sight of children playing. Audrey recalls the principal stating, “Kids need to play. There's so much research on the value of it and the

importance of it in kindergarten, and on a young child's life and development.” Audrey described that principal as “such a proponent” for play, noting, “We need more advocates like that in administration.”

Having administrators who understand and value early childhood education has helped educators like Audrey to have the autonomy to make instructional decisions. While she is guided by the programs adopted by her school, Audrey has been able to supplement those pieces with hands-on experiences for her learners since the leadership within her school acknowledges the benefits of play. She explained that the administration knows “we're doing our job and trusting that in the classroom. That we're following the schedule, but at the same time, making it appropriate for our kids and the level that they're at.” She recognized the background of the administrators may have influenced their views on early childhood education. Audrey stated,

In the past, some of the administrators haven't had earlier early childhood experiences. So that doesn't help, because they can't relate to the younger learning. They've come from maybe middle school or the upper elementary grade levels, so their experiences are obviously different. And their perception of what kindergarten should look like is different too.

Despite her experiences with and observations of past administrators, Audrey seemed content with her current level of trust and her ability to make decisions for her classroom learning environment, summarizing, “I'm trusted enough to do what I need to do in my classroom and have the support if I need it.” An aspect of having the ability to implement developmentally appropriate instruction has been the sense of trust, coupled with the use of resources that are provided. She added,

[As teachers,] we've been left to be trusted that we're teaching [the children] what they need with the resources we have. It's also understanding that they're in kindergarten and they need more than a pencil and paper, worksheet kind of learning. And knowing that there's other ways of teaching and developing their learning through play and through the centers and through the manipulatives and engaging them that way, too.

Finding ways to incorporate play within the parameters given to her by administrators have enabled Audrey to implement play into her urban kindergarten classroom. Reviewing a lesson plan Audrey shared with me, her prioritization of play throughout the day was evident as she included activities such as “manipulative play,” each morning, where children “have an opportunity to explore the classroom by playing cooperatively with manipulatives.” Students also engage in “free play” at least once each day, where her students “choose a free play center and build social skills.” Audrey also incorporates centers four times per week, which are “done in leveled groups and as rotations.” Children rotate through art, math, phonics, and reading centers with activities reflecting the time of year.

Similar to Audrey, Camille also felt a sense of trust by her administrators, whom she believed often came to lead elementary schools after a background of teaching middle and high school. She reflected,

I feel like I've been really lucky with my administrators. I've had administrators that are all middle school, high school teachers and so they look at me and they're like, “I would never want to do your job.” So, they give me a little flexibility and how that's handled. But for some reason, I've always earned the trust, where they let me do what I want. I've been fortunate, I don't know what I would do if I was met with hard opposition of, ‘No,

you're not going to do this.' I don't know if I'd be able to work in a building like that, to be perfectly honest.

Audrey and Camille's feelings of being trusted by administrators enabled them to incorporate play-based learning into their urban kindergarten classroom environments.

However, this was not the case for Lauren, as evidenced by her experience with a principal who had a background as a middle school teacher before becoming an administrator. Lauren recalled the principal having a difficult time understanding why a child would use pom poms and tweezers to build their fine motor skills, stating, "They can use their fine motor skills the same way by having them trace the letter on the dots." Lauren shared that her principal found play to be "too busy." This tension around the idea of play-based learning was a concept Lauren and her teaching partner were challenged with, as they found joy in seeing their students engaged and excited to learn. Lauren recalled,

The busy chaos wasn't loud. They were in it. They were enjoying themselves. They were having little conversations. I would look around the room with my co-teacher and be like, "Oh my gosh, look at them. They're digging out the letters, they're building words, they're doing exactly what they're supposed to be doing! They're on point."

Since Lauren's principal held different beliefs around how kindergarten instruction should look, she demanded Lauren and her co-teacher articulate more specifics in their weekly lesson plans, specifically around the purpose of play and why it was being considered as an instructional strategy. Lauren recalled feeling as though she was in college again with her detailed lesson plans and having every minute of a lesson accounted for. She remembered beginning to doubt her abilities as an early childhood educator, asking herself, "Am I not [teaching] it right? Is [play-based learning] wrong?" The lack of trust and understanding of early

childhood education by her principal left Lauren feeling confused about what she learned in her coursework, what she held as her pedagogical beliefs, and why she was unable to implement play-based learning in her classroom. She asked herself, “Why am I getting heat from something that we were taught to do as an educator?”

Lauren noted that when play was removed from the classroom due to the demands placed on her by her principal, there were decreases in learner engagement and an increase in behavior concerns. Lauren was particularly frustrated when her administrator would use play as a strategy for helping learners feel calm again and ready to return to the classroom environment. She recalled a time when a learner became upset about having to participate in the pencil/paper writing time and ran out of the classroom. When something like this happened, the principal would intercept the student in the hallway, bring the child to her office, offer a snack such as a bag of Cheetos, and then provide an opportunity to play. When she would return with the student to the classroom, she would say, “I got them back to a good spot. I brought them into my office, and I had cars and playdough. I gave them a snack... They did great, they got to play!” Lauren wondered,

Isn't that what we're trying to establish in our classroom? That there can be structured play? And if [play] would have been an option for that child, there wouldn't have been chairs thrown and milk crates thrown. But us [teachers] doing it wasn't fair. But yet someone else got to build that relationship with the child through play. And that was very contradictory.

For Lauren, Camille, and Audrey, the perceptions of play by administration and school leadership had a direct impact on their day-to-day decision making around play-based learning.

**Perceptions of Play by “Outsiders.”** While beliefs about early childhood education and play-based learning from administration can impact educators’ abilities to make instructional decisions, Audrey, Camille, and Lauren also shared that perceptions by “outsiders” to the early childhood realm sometimes makes them feel undervalued and disrespected as professionals. Audrey expressed that it is important to “understand [children] are learning through play, even though to outsiders, it may look like they're not learning." She feels “play is always looked down upon... Unless you are an early childhood educator or teacher.” Audrey described the perception she feels from broader society as, “[Children] are just playing. This isn't daycare, this is school. They need to be learning and they need to be sitting.”

Lauren described similar feelings and felt other teachers in the building knew “what we were doing and how to do it, because they were living it.” However, she believed “parents and other adults in the world have no idea what a kindergarten teacher truly does.” Lauren explained,

I think [people outside of education] lack a little respect [based on] comments they make, like, “What do you do, play patty cake all day? You have summers off.” They really have no idea how hard it is to get littles ready for their next step and journey into learning.

Analogous to Audrey and Lauren, Camille shared her beliefs about early childhood and play and how they compare to people outside of the field,

To me, early childhood is the most important. To people not in education, it's just playing and finger painting... “Well, that's just fun. That's just cute.” So, I think the level of respect isn't necessarily there as it should be.

Although educators such as Camille, Audrey, and Lauren developed their qualifications, competence, and pedagogy as early childhood educators through their university coursework and

professional teaching experiences, the ability to implement play-based learning in their urban learning environments has been a committed yet challenged endeavor. As Audrey summarized, “I want to see people value [play] more and understand that being a kid is important... Play isn't just something that's silly or should be looked down upon. It should be valued as education. Play is learning.”

The educators in this study developed orientations as advocates for play through their teacher education program, pre- and in-service teaching positions, and through interactions with administrators, colleagues, and the community outside of the field of education. These encounters influenced their pedagogical stances on play-based learning and competence as early childhood educators as they worked to provide access to play for their kindergarten learners.

### **Finding 2: Educators Were Committed to their Pedagogical Beliefs about Play**

The second finding that emerged throughout this study on educators’ experiences with the implementation of play-based learning in urban kindergarten classrooms was that educators believed in the benefits of play and the idea that kindergarten sets a foundation for future learning. Stemming from their commitment to their pedagogical beliefs, the educators in this inquiry saw the value of play and how play-based learning experiences supported the learners in their urban classrooms. As Audrey asserted, “I will always believe that play is valuable and important in the development of young children.”

With such a commitment to the importance of play and a belief in the outcomes play can provide, Camille completely reimagined her urban kindergarten classroom learning environment in her first year of teaching. She detailed the arduous process of reconfiguring her learning environment to implement play-based learning. The transformation included the reassignment of staff members and the rearrangement of physical spaces in order to more effectively support her

kindergarten learners and the three- and four-year-old students receiving special education services. Camille recalled the need to surround herself with “like-minded people,” as opposed to the teaching partner she was hired to work with who had “an authoritarian type of style.” Camille remembered,

I learned that I was very much in alignment with the early childhood special education teacher that worked in our building who would come in and service my kids. I didn't like that she was shoved in a corner, like a hallway office, and didn't have enough room for her kids. And she was like, “I would love it if we could collaborate, and my kids could come in and play.”

In Camille’s first year as a professional educator, she collaborated with the early childhood special education teacher at her school who supported 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds. Together, they submitted a proposal to the principal suggesting Camille, with 15 students, move with the special education teacher and 10 special education students into a classroom where the 25 children would share a space. In response to this proposal, the principal said, “Let's do this. This sounds amazing. It would be good for all the kids.”

Camille described her new classroom as a “multi-age dream room.” Collaboratively, Camille and the special education teacher established play areas, flexible options for children to choose where they would play, and supportive systems to ensure that all children would be safe in the learning environment. She reflected,

We got to take that program and make it this beautiful little learning environment where our three-year-old special ed kids were with us for three years. So, by the time they were five, they were the leaders of the classroom. They knew the routines, and no matter how severe their needs were, they were still viewed as the kid to go to, the kid that knew what

was going on. It was an amazing place to put the children in that leadership role, too. If I could go back to any time, that was such a magical time when we could make that all happen.

Camille's description of her classroom environment as "magical" through the implementation of play and the inclusion of students with special needs spoke to the value she placed on play and her commitment to the outcomes she felt play could provide to all learners in her urban kindergarten classroom. The three educators in this study discussed their beliefs in the power of play and the benefits play can provide.

### ***Teachers' Expression of the Benefits of Play***

A particular type of commitment to play emerged through the common thread which wove through each of the three participants' responses, expressing the benefits of play and the outcomes play-based learning provides for all young children. The benefits and outcomes of play the participants identified included social, emotional, and academic learning, as well as building relationships with teachers and peers alike. Lauren stated, "I believe providing opportunities to learn through play creates an authentic environment. Play helps learners develop relationships, make connections, and find joy in learning."

The participants in this study spoke of their commitment to the value of children having the time and space to build relationships with teachers and peers, as they believed relationships lent themselves to building trust, security, and comfort within the learning environment. Lauren asserted, "I think relationships are the most powerful thing you can have in any classroom, because if you don't have relationships with children, with your learners, then you don't have the trust." Feeling trusted in the learning environment allows for "vulnerability" and the ability to

“feel safe to share your knowledge, even if [your answer is] wrong.” Having a space that welcomes vulnerability and builds trust leads to confidence, according to Lauren. She explained,

Once you're confident talking with your peers, and talking with others, and sharing your thoughts and opinions, the more comfortable you are sharing your math strategy, the more comfortable you are reading and maybe making a mistake, because you have those friendships in place. You're learning from one another. Children are really smart, and they can teach other kiddos how they solved that problem.

Audrey held similar beliefs as Lauren on the topic of relationships, adding that building relationships is “how [children] develop comfort and trust” in the classroom setting. Establishing connections with learners goes far beyond just knowing their names, but also learning “their backgrounds, where they come from, what they do, who they like to do it with... what their interests are outside of school or with their families.” Audrey noted that relationships are not only developed between the teacher and students, but between students as well, often through play experiences. She stated,

That's where play can come in, because [the children] explore the different areas of play in the classroom and see who's interested in that, too. And then they start developing those friendships and building relationships beyond the adult ones or other ones they have in their lives as well.

Lauren believed having the time dedicated to getting to know one's students as individual learners “impacts their education.” She explained,

When you can make those little connections like, “Oh, how was your taekwondo class last night? Yeah, I heard you got that yellow belt!” Or “I love those Minecraft LEGO sets. My son does those, too!” If you can't connect with them, they're just another kid.

You need to make [children] feel special. When they feel special, they feel valued. And that's [developed] through conversation and having those relationships.

The three urban educators in this study believed having ample opportunities for teachers to get to know their learners and for learners to get to know one another was a necessary commitment in an early childhood classroom and occurs through social interactions, such as those that arise during play. Camille discussed how she teaches her field students and student teachers that playtime should not be used as their prep time. She shared,

Don't take that time away from the kids. Get in there and play Uno, or go to the block area and build a huge tower and have fun knocking it all down, or lay in a book area and read with kids, because those are your touch points that are really going to, number one, take some of their learning and their play to the next level. But then also help form those relationships. That's going to help with behavior management, classroom community, all those things.

In addition to instilling confidence in learners and building relationships, the educators in this study believed having the ability to connect with peers supports the development of other social, emotional, and academic skills, including critical thinking, problem solving, perseverance, and risk-taking. Lauren shared,

I think having those [skills] in your toolbox will help you be successful down your path of learning. As learning gets harder and expectations become heavier, you at least have the foundation to be like, "I can do this. Because I have my peers, I have the competence, I have empathy, I am patient," and that social emotional growth is developed through play.

Audrey held similar beliefs, stating, “Young children are still developing, and a lot of their development is through play and creativity. Play may be a way for them to explore learning and interactions.” Camille echoed Lauren and Audrey’s commitment to the benefits of play, adding the personal development that occurs when young children experience play, especially the concept of conflict resolution, making choices we “feel good about,” and making friends.

Camille added,

There's all those 21st century skills that we're told now that kids need the most. When you really dissect those, it comes back to, “Can I work with other people and learn from other people and reflect and do well?” And what you do in play is all of those things.

According to Camille, the ability to build skills through play will “help them later in life to feel good about their choices and have the self-esteem to be like, ‘I don't want to do that,’ or, ‘Oh, I messed up, here's how I'm going to make it better.’”

The benefits of play Lauren, Camille, and Audrey shared aligned with their individual definitions of play and their commitment to the growth and development of children in urban kindergarten classrooms. As Lauren stated, “Giving learners the opportunity to learn and grow through hands-on play is creating memorable experiences that will last a lifetime.”

### ***Kindergarten as Foundational***

Among the evidence of the commitment Audrey, Lauren, and Camille had to the pedagogy of play, I observed the teachers’ belief in the importance of early learning experiences and the role of those experiences in creating a foundation for future learning. Audrey explained that in her opinion, “the purpose of kindergarten is to experience and learn that school is where learning and hopefully joy for learning begins.” She noted that kindergarten should expand upon “the curiosity and discovery children already have for the world around them.” Lauren held

similar beliefs, stressing the need for kindergarten to be engaging for students in order to develop skills necessary as they get older and how truly foundational kindergarten is on a young child's formative development. She explained,

To get littles ready for their next step and journey into learning... that means play, where they're learning to be social, learning to share. Be kind to one another, be respectful to their peers, to holding the paper or holding the pencil and paper. But we're developing those skills for them in a different way. That delivery is different. But it's still preparing them to be successful and be confident in their journey of learning.

Camille also discussed the importance of skill development for kindergarten learners, specifically life skills to advocate for themselves and what they need to be successful. To feel empowered to say, "I need a little more help here," or "this is hard for me" and to be able to go into a classroom setting and to do those things, I feel like that's what the foundation of kindergarten really is."

With kindergarten serving as a springboard for the educational experiences of young children, Lauren, Audrey, and Camille discussed their shared belief that part of their role as educators was to help transition children from their previous environments (i.e., daycare, home, preschool) into the formal school setting. Audrey noted,

As young children enter school, they are most likely coming from environments where some form of play has been an essential part of their young lives. As they enter school and kindergarten, I strongly feel it is important to create that safety and learning through play with what is familiar to them as they begin their academic and learning years.

Similarly, Camille discussed the difference between a child who experienced a formal K4 setting prior to kindergarten and children who have not experienced other school or daycare settings.

She shared,

It's interesting, because K4 is optional. It's interesting to have those kids that had K4, walk into my classroom and then have the newbie that's never been in school, that's been at home, or never in a daycare, and they stand out, they really do. Because it's not the academic content, that as their teacher, I want them to come in understanding what a letter is versus a number. That's not my concern. But it's the simple, I say “Good morning” to you, and you say “Good morning” back. And I'm not going to just get up and run around the room whenever I want to. It's understanding what school is.

Lauren held parallel beliefs to Audrey and Camille on the topic of transitioning children into the learning environment. She shared,

I truly believe kindergarten is probably the toughest grade you'll teach... You're bringing in these babies that know their mama or their dad and their home to what's expected for them for a full day [at school], and how to navigate that as little people who become a little community, family members, for kindergarten teachers.

The educators in this study stressed their commitment to establishing and fostering relationships between teacher/student and student/student, particularly in an environment of play in their urban kindergarten classrooms. The participants felt having opportunities for play encouraged learners to reap the benefits of a play-based learning environment, including building confidence, being vulnerable, and building trust with their peers and their teachers. While the conversations with the teachers in this study did not always lead to explicit conversation around individual needs and access to play, the educators in this study expressed strong opinions on their

commitment to play for all children. As they concurred, the benefits of play help to establish a foundation not only for kindergarten, but for future learning endeavors for the children in their urban kindergarten classrooms.

### **Finding 3: Educators Balanced Honoring Childhood with Kindergarten Expectations**

Influenced by their beliefs that kindergarten creates a foundation for future learning and play is beneficial for young learners in urban school settings, the educators in this study sought to strike a balance between honoring childhood with the expected outcomes placed on them as professionals. The teachers had unrelenting beliefs about the value of play in childhood and instructional practices and sought to balance expectations within their educational systems.

#### ***Valuing Childhood and “Letting Kids be Kids”***

A common thread that surfaced throughout this inquiry was the teachers’ desire to value childhood and not force children to advance too quickly out of their legitimate kindergarten classroom spaces. The educators in this study recognized that often, what is asked of their students and the expectations that are placed upon them are “not age appropriate,” as Lauren stated. She shared, “Children are forced to grow up sooner than they need to... I feel like they don't have the opportunity to be little. The expectations are a lot.” In alignment with Lauren, Audrey shared how she prioritizes play and aims to let her students experience childhood as much as possible. She noted, “Your childhood is such a short part of your life. I look at some of these kids... they're six going on 16.”

Audrey remembered a moment from her own childhood that stuck with her. She described her kindergarten teacher and an interaction that left an impression on Audrey’s beliefs about play and childhood. She offered,

My kindergarten teacher was my favorite teacher, and she reminded me of the fairy godmother in Cinderella. I remember making her a pretend pizza out of playdough and I remember being so nervous to take it to her to have her pretend to eat it. And she pretended to eat! And I was like, ‘Oh, my gosh, she loved my pizza!’ It's just that discovery through play.

Moments such as this one, according to Audrey, highlight the notion that “childhood is such a small fraction of our lives” and “one of the best things about being kindergarten teachers is you get to see that youthfulness and that love of wanting to learn and be included and being a kid.” She continued, “You need to let kids be kids and have that time. Because they don't get it back and it's such a small part of their lives.”

In their urban kindergarten classrooms, the educators in this study honored childhood by providing physical space and materials, as well as negotiating time to incorporate play, even if their formal schedule did not allow for play.

**Providing Space and Materials for Play.** The educators in this study provided detailed descriptions of their urban kindergarten learning environments. As I believe classroom environments are an extension of teacher beliefs and a representation of their pedagogy, I provided the details of each of the teachers’ classroom from descriptions in their own words.

***Camille: Flexibility and Choice.*** Camille described her classroom as “humongous” and that it provides space for her and the special education teacher, whose “home base” is in Camille’s classroom. Camille explained,

Since we tried to do inclusion and do inclusion correctly, we got the big space because we share. We have a little bit cordoned off [that] call the ‘Houghton Hangout,’ because her name is Mrs. Houghton. Mrs. Houghton can take a small group back there and work

and it's a little bit private. We have enough space in the room to do that, where she has a kidney table and six shelves. She almost has a little classroom in the back corner, and it works.

In addition to Mrs. Houghton's space, Camille shared her use of flexible seating as part of her "management technique" and also to enable students to figure out "how they learn best." She shared, "The carpet and smartboard look traditional, but the rest of it is shelves and chairs and tables and everything is roped off into different play areas. So, there's not a work zone and a play zone."

Within her classroom space, Camille has areas dedicated to STEM activities, writing, art, blocks, sensory, reading, puzzles, dramatic play, and games. She also "opens the carpet up to music and movement... and [the children] get to dance on the carpet, which is often a hit." A supply cart holds all of the materials a child might need to complete a task, but Camille's students can choose to work in any of the spaces at any point during the day. She shared the "only time [play is] prescribed is when we're doing reading stations, and then I'm like, 'You're in the green group, you have to go work with the student teacher,' or 'You're in vocabulary, go where the vocabulary supplies are.'"

Camille referred to the classroom space as the "Kids' Zone," where "there's not too many things that are nos." At the time of our interview, Camille was in the process of turning her classroom into a rainforest, with "paper and lights and all sorts of things hanging" in a "full construction zone." As she stated, "Big things are happening here."

***Audrey: Opportunities to Learn Through Play.*** Audrey described her space as "rather large" with "many spaces designated for learning through play. The carpet area serves as a hub for gathering and playing. Audrey described,

There is a bookshelf filled with puzzles and manipulative play items (cubes, lacing beads and materials, felt play, pegs and peg boards, games). The carpet area is where we play with those items and look at books after morning work, which is completed at the opposite end of the classroom. The carpet area is also where we have our calendar and reading, math, social studies, science, SEL lesson introductions, and do our "sharing bag" and story times.

Throughout the classroom, Audrey has “a couple of ‘little friend’ couches, a little chair and bean bag, an art easel for drawing, painting, and creating [as well as] seasonal, character building, and many picture and leveled books on the shelves and in baskets.” Explaining additional spaces in the classroom, Audrey added,

Another bookshelf by the little couches has "dress-up" accessories (masks, purses, necklaces, bracelets, etc.), wooden city blocks and people, play money and a basket filled with dress up clothes. On top of this bookshelf, we have a couple of play cash registers, a play mailbox and baby dolls. On the other side of this bookshelf is a felt play kitchen and the play kitchen area (a wooden fridge, a wooden stove and a wooden sink and play food, dishes, etc.). There is also a small table with tablecloths in a basket underneath, a wooden mixer, a pretend blender and coffee machine, a play grocery cart and a pretend vacuum. In the center of the room, we have bookshelves with play dolls (Barbie, Disney character dolls, etc.), a wooden and a plastic dollhouse with pieces to go inside, a play farm and animals, a baby crib and carrier, and play dinosaurs. Another shelf area has a marble race, big and little Legos, wooden trains and train tracks, cars and car tracks and a road rug, Lincoln Logs, gears and wooden blocks.

In addition to these spaces, in the back of the classroom there is a “table and seating area where [the children] complete morning work, reading and math times, and center times,” as well as have snack and rest time. Audrey shared they also have playdough, kinetic sand, and a sensory/water/sand table. The children enjoy reading and playing with stuffed animals, which are spread throughout the classroom. A “tall tent with some comfy pillows” that “glows in the dark” is another space where children enjoy playing. Audrey mentioned that “the kids usually pick their play interests and find spots within the room to use their imaginations and play. They also like playing ‘teacher.’”

***Lauren: Transformations of a Traditional Classroom.*** Lauren described her K4/K5 multi-age space as “two classrooms connected with double doors.” She and her co-teacher had a combined 54 students in their learning space. Lauren described her room as a “traditional classroom, with multiple tables that each seated four children, a kidney table for meeting with small groups, and a large rug situated in front of the promethean board.” Lauren and her teaching partner decorated the classroom with “bold, bright colors and had items like the alphabet, number line, calendar, and birthdays displayed.”

To make the environment playful for their K4/K5 learners, Lauren and her teaching partner chose a different theme each school year and incorporated it into their decorations and even the language used in the classroom. Lauren shared she would say things like, “Ooh! You’re getting toasty like a marshmallow!” when they had the camping theme, “You’re really MOOving now!” when they had a farm theme and would tell students they were “Looking sharp!” the year they had a cactus theme.

When Lauren moved into her classroom, a kitchen set and water table had been left behind by the previous K4 teacher who taught in the space. This was the area where Lauren and

her co-teacher would set up the manipulatives for children to use during their how-to writing unit, before those materials were taken away. The classroom also had a “shelf containing baby dolls, action figures, blocks, and playdough,” but Lauren and her partner were told by their principal they either needed to remove it from the room or turn the shelf around “so the kids couldn’t see it as a distraction during learning.” The play items were kept in a designated area in the classroom that could be used on Fridays “if [the class] got through everything.” Lauren noted, “We always made sure we got through everything.”

**Providing Access to Play.** While the three educators experienced varying degrees of autonomy in determining their daily schedules, all three participants discussed finding time for play. Camille proclaimed, “We play every day!” She explained,

I feel like flexibility within lessons makes for magical learning opportunities. Within my structured day I follow an academic schedule, but play and student choice are woven throughout the entire day. Students are always working through the classroom activities at their own pace and participating in various ways. I love to give students choice in how to practice their skills and learning even though the day follows a strict schedule.

Even with a “strict” schedule, Camille believes “students need ample time to play. They need opportunities that allow them to take play to new levels and that doesn't happen in under 45 minutes.”

Audrey relayed similar experiences to Camille with making time for play, explaining, “We just have such a busy schedule. I feel like we fit [play] in every day, but sometimes it's just working around everything else that's built into the school day.” Audrey emphasized that she wants “to make sure there is a lot of time [for play] in a child's day” She explained, “Sometimes

our other instructional times run a little longer depending on lessons, but we always make sure to get in an adequate amount of play time every day.”

Even Lauren, who experienced rigid expectations put in place by her administrator found ways to “sneak” in play. She explained, “When I felt [play] wasn't really an option, then I would be like, ‘We’ve got to get this done babies. Because if we get this done, we get to play.’”

Valuing childhood is a notion that struck similar chords across all three participants in this study. Having the ability to honor childhood by providing play spaces, materials, and access resonated with all of the participants, but caused Lauren to become emotional as she reflected on her experience as a kindergarten teacher working under an administrator who did not value play. She began crying as she reflected,

[Kids are] little people that have a lot of feeling and a lot of heart. They deserve to feel that at school. They can make your heart grow so big, because they are kids that just want to be valued. I robbed kids of it. I wasn't able to do what I wanted to do, that I felt I could do well. I wasn't able to deliver that because it was so content heavy. Educators know what littles need, and I feel like I didn't get to do that for them. I didn't give them the experience.

Valuing childhood and helping children to savor and enjoy their kindergarten experiences resonated through each of the educators’ responses. The educators in this study worked to honor the kindergarten experience by establishing playful, joyful learning environments with spaces and materials to play, and also made time for play a priority in their classrooms.

### ***Balancing Expectations***

While the educators valued childhood and took it upon themselves to provide space, materials, and access to play in their urban kindergarten classrooms, they were still charged with

adhering to the expectations placed upon them by their administrators and districts in which they were employed. Audrey, Lauren, and Camille, acknowledged how what they were tasked to do as educators needed to be finessed, striving toward balance between what they were asked to do by their administrators and what they felt was appropriate for their students. The topics of balancing instructional approaches and the needs of learners, as well as balancing expected outcomes all arose throughout the course of this inquiry.

When discussing expectations placed on kindergarten teachers and their students, the educators in this study discussed the need to balance instructional approaches for their kindergarten learners. Audrey noted, “I do believe there should be a balance with instructional and academic learning, yet also believe play should be an essential part of a kindergarten day.” She explained,

I feel oftentimes that kindergarten has become the new first grade, where there's so much emphasis on rigor and academics and learning and yet, I try to remember and put into perspective that [my students have] only been on this earth for four and five years. Then to be like, "Here, read this," and expect them to do so much, when some of them come in not even knowing how to read or write their name or even hold a pencil.

Audrey described navigating the waters of honoring childhood, which she valued, and meeting the expectations placed upon her as an educator. She described the need to balance the expectations with instruction appropriate for the four- and five-year-olds in her urban classroom. For example, rather than forcing a kindergartener to start writing with paper and pencil right away, a gentler approach may be needed. Audrey described a gentle method to guiding children in their discovery of writing. She explained, “You have to find ways that you can integrate [writing], but not make it feel pressured and rigorous right off the bat. It’s their first time for a lot

of them. It's their first experience with school.” Similarly, Lauren noted how she needed to balance what content was implemented with how it was delivered, needing to tailor instruction to her classroom of young learners. She explained,

[Administrators] have got to respect that we need to tweak [the curriculum] for those babies. Because if we don't tweak it and we're not animated, and give [children] the opportunity to make something, or create, or grow from it, [then] they don't understand why we're teaching it. They need to feel like their voices are heard and they have choices they can make along the way of what they're learning and doing in the classroom.

Camille held similar beliefs to Lauren with regard to choice and how it helps engage students in the learning. She shared, “I feel like you have to have choice in order to have buy in. If we can have activities that are student driven, it allows kids to feel safe to play.”

In addition to finding balance with how instruction was implemented, educators balanced the demands placed on their young learners for sustaining attention and sitting still for extended periods of time. Lauren noted with a K4/K5 multi-age grouping, the children’s span of development was expansive. She stated, “There were kindergarteners that were very mature and understood school and their role [as learners].” She continued, “And then [there were] the kids who [were] like, “Why am I here? I'm here all day? When do I get to eat?” But yet, [they’re] expected to sit on the carpet, like a whole-body listener, or we go through this lesson, and they're like, "When is this done?"

Reflecting on the idea of kindergarten-aged children being tasked with sitting on the carpet for a 90-minute literacy block, Camille questioned,

Why in the world do we have these inappropriate demands on kids? People are like, “We have all these behavior problems.” Well, of course you do. You're trying to put a kid in a

box. Kids don't fit in a box. You've got to make the box fit the kid. And I think people lose sight of that really easily.

With a range of abilities often present in kindergarten classrooms, Camille, Audrey, and Lauren all noted the importance of appropriately challenging each student while simultaneously meeting their individual needs, yet another point of balance in their teaching practices. Camille stated, "Every child has their own path. We need to view [children] as individuals and make adaptations so that each child can be successful in their own ways." Camille discussed how standards were at the front of all learning. She shared, "I have been very fortunate to have been given flexibility from administrators on how I meet those standards. I have been trusted as a professional to meet standards by differentiating based on student needs." Additionally, Audrey noted,

I do feel all children should leave kindergarten aware of what is required and needed entering first grade. I also know children learn at different rates and do not all perform at the same levels, so the standards may not always be met for each individual child.

The teachers acknowledged an aspect of being a kindergarten educator is to prepare children for future learning. Lauren shared, "We set expectations in kindergarten that give learners the confidence needed to be successful in their future classrooms."

The educators in this study acknowledged the academic expectations placed upon them through the kindergarten standards. However, they also sought to encourage the tenet that a major aspect of their role as kindergarten teachers lies within how children leave their kindergarten experience feeling about themselves and their ability to interact cooperatively and respectfully with their peers. Audrey noted,

Obviously, I want my kids to learn and know their ABCs and know how to count and do those basic skills and things that they need once they reach first grade. But I also want them to learn how to be good people.

Lauren explained,

[Children] just want to enjoy finding out who they are, and they find out who they are through exploring and having the opportunities to learn about different things. In school, we introduce them to so many things. Their interests and hobbies evolve and just watching them figure out who they are is so unique and rewarding.

Camille's beliefs mirrored Lauren and Audrey, as she stated,

I have this whole rationale where kids might not leave my classroom being the most perfect reader or academic student, but they're gonna leave my classroom being kind and have a good view of themselves. I put so much pride on teaching kids self-regulation and teaching kids how to feel good about their work. Teaching kids how to struggle and be comfortable struggling and helping empower their voice. I feel like if there's one thing that I pride myself on is I want kids to look back at kindergarten and be like, "She taught me how to love myself and feel empowered..." That's my hope.

The knowledge and skills with which the kindergarten educators aimed for their learners to leave kindergarten extended beyond the state standards or learning targets from a boxed curriculum. Rather, they wanted to instill confidence in their learners, hoped their students would learn to treat themselves and others with kindness, and build the capacity in each child to discover who they truly are in a world pushing them to grow up quickly. With these outcomes in mind, the educators in this study balanced their commitment to honoring childhood with the expectations placed on them by their schools and districts.

## Summary

Findings of this inquiry on the experiences of educators implementing play-based learning in their urban kindergarten classrooms included the idea that educators became advocates for play through their experiences, educators believe in the benefits of play and the foundation of kindergarten, and educators balance honoring childhood with expectations for kindergarten outcomes. As evidenced by these findings, Camille, Audrey, and Lauren leaned on their pedagogical underpinnings established through their university coursework and early educational experiences to incorporate play-based learning into their urban kindergarten classrooms to the best of their abilities, albeit to varying degrees. Because they believed in the benefits of play and the foundational importance of kindergarten, the three participants worked to value childhood and allow “kids to be kids” while balancing the expectations placed upon them in their schools and districts. The findings presented here were the rousing for the points of discussion presented in Chapter 5

## Chapter Five: Discussion

*“If we want our children to move mountains, we first have to let them get out of their chairs.”*

- Nicolette Sowder

Today’s young children are forced to grow up quickly, so much so that the very concept of childhood is being “threatened with extinction” (Elkind, 2006, p. 3). Early childhood learners are ordered to fall into line, like soulless “buckets to fill,” moving along a “conveyor belt” (Mueller & File, 2019, p. 48) or “assembly line” (hooks, 1994, p. 13; Pinar, 2004, p. 28) as knowledge is poured into them (Freire, 2005). The accountability culture of “coping and compliance” controls activity, ensures that exposure is uniform, and maintains discipline, all while forcing students to be passive and unquestioning (Joseph et al., 2011, p. 39). Too often, a learner is “trained like an animal rather than educated like a human being” (Dewey, 1916, p. 18). Rather than build, children are asked to write. Instead of run, children are forced to sit in neat rows. Rather than laugh, children are expected to keep quiet unless called upon. Compliance is demanded; imagination, stifled.

The first chapter of this study began by centering the “hijacking of kindergarten” (Miller & Almon, 2009, p. 16). Kindergarten teachers have been dually tasked with meeting demands placed on them by administrators through increased accountability and standardized instructional practices (Bodrova et al., 2013; Guirguis, 2018; Michael-Luna et al., 2019; Miller & Almon, 2009; Nicolopoulou, 2010) while simultaneously navigating and negotiating their own pedagogical beliefs about developmentally appropriate instruction and play. As articulated by the participants in this study, balancing these expectations is a regular occurrence in their attempts to provide a just and equitable education for all learners in their urban kindergarten classrooms.

In this chapter, I consider the meanings and implications of each finding in relation to the scholarship discussed in Chapter Two and the theoretical and critical frameworks outlined in Chapter Three. I also discuss the implications these findings have for teacher education programs, school and district administrators, and education policy. Additionally, I provide recommendations for further study. Within this chapter, I conceptualize a model of critical play pedagogy, and I conclude with final thoughts and reflections regarding the significance of this research which focused on teachers' experiences with the implementation of play-based learning in urban kindergarten settings.

### **Discussion of Research Questions and Review of Methodology**

This phenomenological case study was guided by questions focused on the experiences of educators with the implementation of play-based learning in urban kindergarten classrooms. The research sub-questions included:

1. How do educators define play within a classroom context?
2. What are the pedagogical beliefs of kindergarten educators regarding play-based learning?
3. In what ways, if any, are kindergarten educators incorporating play-based learning experiences into their classrooms and ensuring access to each child?
4. What alignments and/or tensions exist between the pedagogical beliefs of educators regarding play-based learning and the initiatives and directives of the school district in which they are employed?

The questions and their relationships to the findings are summarized in Table 12. This method of summarizing is grounded in my phenomenological, hermeneutic lens, as the findings arose from the examination of lived experiences (Adams & van Manen, 2008; Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007;

Creswell, 2014; Farrell, 2020; Neubauer et al., 2019; Østergaard et al., 2008; Webb & Welsh, 2019) of educators as they related to a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2014; Webb & Welsh, 2019) (i.e., play-based learning), discovered through the exploration of my research questions. The findings are further discussed in the subsequent sections.

**Table 12**

*Summary of Research Questions and Findings*

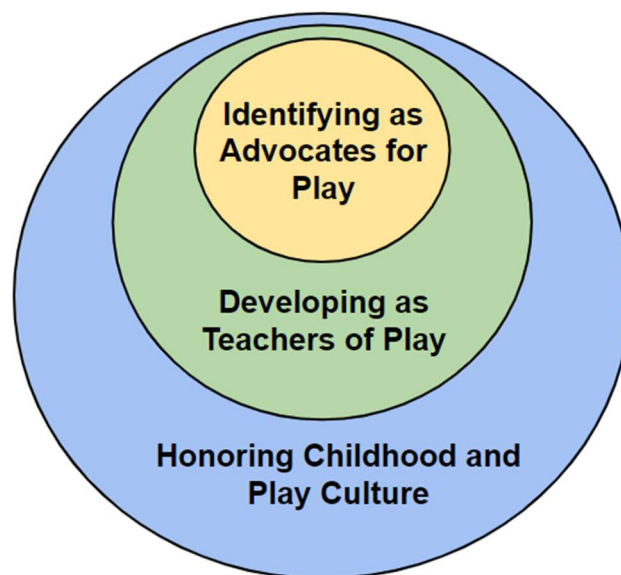
<b>Primary Research Question:</b> What are the experiences of educators regarding the role of play-based learning in urban kindergarten classrooms?	
<b>Research Sub-Question</b>	<b>Finding</b>
How do educators define play within a classroom context?	(addressed in introduction to Chapter 4)
What are the pedagogical beliefs of kindergarten educators regarding play-based learning?	Finding 1: Educators Became Advocates for Play Through Their Experiences
	Finding 2: Educators Were Committed to their Pedagogical Beliefs about Play
In what ways, if any, are kindergarten educators incorporating play-based learning experiences into their classrooms and ensuring access to each child?	Finding 1: Educators Became Advocates for Play Through Their Experiences
	Finding 2: Educators Were Committed to their Pedagogical Beliefs about Play
	Finding 3: Educators Balanced Honoring Childhood with Kindergarten Expectations
What alignments and/or tensions exist between the pedagogical beliefs of educators regarding play-based learning and the initiatives and directives of the school district in which they are employed?	Finding 1: Educators Became Advocates for Play Through Their Experiences
	Finding 3: Educators Balanced Honoring Childhood with Kindergarten Expectations

Due to the nature of a phenomenological, hermeneutic approach, this study required collaboration between the participants and myself in the form of dialogue. The centering of collaboration was crucial to my engagement with the participants in a co-construction of their classroom experiences and encounters with play-based learning throughout their work in early childhood education. With a critical lens, the perspectives of the educators as promoters (i.e., of equitable early childhood educational systems) and advocates (i.e., for access to play) guided this research.

Three important aspects presented themselves as I reflected on the findings of this study, considered the implications for early childhood practice, and noted how educators navigate their roles in the classroom. These aspects included ways the educators engaged in (1) honoring childhood and play culture, (2) developing identities as teachers of play, and (3) identifying as advocates for play and play-based learning. Figure 7 represents the three aspects I conceptualized as critical play pedagogy.

**Figure 7**

*Aspects of Critical Play Pedagogy*



Beginning with the aspect of honoring childhood and play culture (represented as the outer blue circle), the early childhood educators in this study worked to honor childhood and strove to promote a culture of play in their early childhood classrooms. This work of honoring children existed despite the need to navigate varying degrees of trust and autonomy from administrators, curricular mandates, and other professional demands. I found the teachers in my study had a firm belief in the right of children to have access to play. They created time and space for play, and they offered materials to support play in their urban classrooms. This outer circle represents the foundational aspect within a model of critical play pedagogy where teachers are committed to honoring childhood as a place of joy and providing age and developmentally appropriate learning experiences to engage their students in an active learning environment.

The green circle nested within the outermost blue circle signifies the aspect of developing identities as teachers of play. Through my study, I learned this aspect of play pedagogy moves beyond providing logistical support of play (i.e., time, space, materials) to establish teachers' deeply rooted pedagogical beliefs about the benefits of play. Camille, Lauren, and Audrey believed in their own dynamic development as teachers of play. Their evolution of play pedagogy began in their pre-service years, moved with them through their induction into their own classrooms, and continues to evolve in their current practice. Early childhood educators who have developed play pedagogies understand the important foundational skills that are established through play and how those foundations set the stage for future learning. Because of their strong pedagogical stances, educators in this tier are able to center the lives of children in play-oriented learning and work within their systems (albeit, sometimes strategically) to incorporate play—as much as possible—into the learning environment.

The innermost yellow circle is nested even further into the model, as it is grounded by first, the outermost circle (honoring childhood and play culture), and then the mid-level circle (developing as teachers of play). This inner-most aspect establishes early childhood educators' identities as advocates for play. During the study, I learned how the educators advocated for play through an unwavering commitment to ensuring *all* learners have access to age and developmentally appropriate play in their classroom settings. I noticed the teachers' advocacy for play went beyond navigating tension and providing time, space, and materials. Within my conceptualization of critical play pedagogy, I seek to frame advocacy more explicitly within culturally sustaining practices (Paris, 2012) to honor the lived experiences of children learning, growing, and playing in early childhood classroom environments. Teachers of critical play pedagogy see themselves as not only advocates for play, but promoters of equity-oriented, accessible play practices for all children. Informed by the teachers' experiences, this nested representation summarizes my conceptualization of critical play pedagogy. The subsequent sections discuss each of the nested aspects in detail.

### **Honoring Childhood and the Culture of Play: The Outermost Circle**

The educators in this study noted the value of play and were committed to their learners experiencing play in any form within their kindergarten classrooms. Camille had the autonomy to fully incorporate play-based learning into her kindergarten classroom and did not seem concerned about having time for play. Audrey and Lauren, on the other hand, expressed the concept of time being a hindrance to implementation, especially with regard to working around program expectations and schedules, even though both tried to make time for play as much as possible. My experiences with the teachers inspired me to think about the notion of *making time for play*.

The notion of time impacting the ability to incorporate play aligned with the literature, as the decline in opportunities for play during the school day has become increasingly noticeable (Burriss & Burriss, 2011; Carlsson-Paige, 2020; Kalliala, 2006; London, 2019; Miller & Almon, 2009; Tsai et al., 2023) in the current era of accountability (Cochran-Smith et al., 2017). Intensely scheduled academic programming (Bassok et al., 2016; Genishi & Dyson, 2012; Nicolopoulou, 2010), removal of recess from the school day (Jarrett et al., 2015; London, 2019; Yogman et al., 2018), and denial of recess as a disciplinary measure (Barros et al., 2009; Jarrett, 2013; London, 2019; Turner et al., 2013) prevent access to play and further exacerbate inequities in urban early childhood education settings. Moreover, disparities in preschool and kindergarten programming experiences contribute to a “racial play/learning gap” from the moment formal schooling begins (Carlsson-Paige, 2020, para. 10).

The disparities that exist in play-based experiences give rise to the question as to why play is seen as antithetical to learning. Why is the joy of play eradicated, as if it wastes time and is detrimental to the learning and life outcomes of young children? When in fact, an abundance of evidence suggests otherwise. According to Carlsson-Paige (2020),

Decades of research and theory tell us that play is the primary way that young children make sense of their world. Play is how children maintain emotional balance; it's how they cope. Play is such a driving force in children's lives that it is sometimes called the engine of their development. No one teaches children how to play, yet they all know how to do it. Hardly a frivolous activity, play is not only the vehicle children use to cope, it's also how they learn —how they build concepts, invent ideas and learn to think for themselves. (para. 4)

Troublesome to the perspective that play is extraneous and incompatible to learning is that play is removed for some groups of children, and seen as enhancement for other groups (Jordan, 2022). Childhood is dishonored through the elimination of play (i.e., social engagement, oral language developments, and creative/critical thinking), and the suppression of play is more often seen in urban settings espousing curricular practices of direct instruction (Fowler, 2018; Genishi & Dyson, 2012). For example, a survey of 189 kindergarten teachers working in the poorest and wealthiest school districts in Massachusetts found child-directed activities (i.e., play, recess, rest) to be “minimal or non-existent” in low-socioeconomic districts, although teachers in both groups indicated decreases in scheduled time for these activities (Fowler, 2018, p. 1). Overall, children attending school in low-socioeconomic districts experienced about 100 fewer minutes of free play and recess each week compared to the kindergarteners attending schools in high-socioeconomic districts.

Instead, what we learn from teachers, such as the educators of this study, is the power of learning through play and the value of engaging with peers in joyful, active experiences. When play experiences are taken away, as when Lauren’s principal asked for the removal of the play centers, children notice. Lauren recalled how the children asked why they were no longer able to play. Brown and colleagues (2020), discuss this as the removal of joy in contrast to teachers’ desire to support students through meaningful experiences.

Time and space given to play in urban kindergarten classrooms encourages the development of relationships and collaboration between teacher/student and student/student (Genishi & Dyson, 2012) within the school context (Bronfenbrenner, 1974). Relationships are crucial for teachers to nurture and honor the assets learners bring to school with them each day (Yosso, 2005). Understanding what brings children joy, their interests, and what excites them

fosters learners' sense of feeling valued and heard within their classroom space. When asset-based perspectives (Paris, 2012, 2016; Yosso, 2005) are leveraged to shape and deepen relationships with learners, connections to their communities and families also have the opportunity to develop (Bronfenbrenner, 1974).

This outermost circle, honoring childhood and the culture of play, serves as a foundation for the conceptualization of critical play pedagogy and supports the development of identities as teachers of play.

### **Developing Identities as Teachers of Play: The Mid-Level Circle**

Educators in this inquiry spoke frequently of how they developed their understandings of play (i.e., teacher education; early teaching years). In addition, they discussed their knowledge of the benefits of play and the important role play serves in a kindergarten classroom, particularly with regard to building relationships, supporting engagement, forging connections, instilling a joy of learning through exploration, and building social, emotional, and academic skills. The educators' pedagogical beliefs on the importance of learning through play were voiced through this inquiry and supported by early childhood scholarship (Bongiorno, 2018; Carlsson-Paige, 2020; Edwards, 2017; Garvey, 1990; Nontell, 2021; Stremmel et al., 2019; Yogman et al., 2018).

The teachers of this study echoed what is known about play-based learning. Providing access to play-based learning encourages children to engage in activities that build important executive functioning skills (Montroy et al., 2016; Sutterby & Kharod, 2019; Tayler, 2015; Yogman et al., 2018), self-regulation (Bodrova et al., 2013; Elkonin, 1977/2005; Montroy et al., 2016; Vygotsky, 1966/2016), social skills (Fox & Riconscente, 2008; Yogman et al., 2018), and

academic skills such as literacy and math (Bodrova & Leong, 2005; Epstein, 2014; Vogt et al., 2018) through an equitable access point (Taylor & Boyer, 2020).

According to Kalliala (2006), play serves an essential role in the optimal development of young children, as “play enhances every aspect of children’s development and learning” and acts as a child’s “window to the world” (p. 139). Play experiences offer children interactions that move beyond their ability to comprehend a text or write neatly in complete sentences. Play affords children opportunities to build curiosity and access learning by *doing*, rather than just observing or hearing. By providing access to play for all learners, schools can act as mechanisms for responsive, equity-oriented practices by dismantling systems that offer play to some learners but deny it to others, harming the educational experiences and outcomes of children (Jordan, 2022).

From what I noticed in engaging with my participants, being a teacher of play was a mindset, a way of being, an inherent disposition that created opportunities for play and occurred organically in moments, both big and small. Play did not have to be posted on a schedule for it to happen. Play occurred during the school day because experienced teachers like Camille, Audrey, and Lauren carried with them a constant desire to make learning joyful and engaging, like a lit pilot light that is always burning, ready to ignite when the moment strikes.

In my experience, schools can offer unique opportunities for children to come together in a shared space and forge meaningful connections based on common interests such as building with Lego bricks, playing house, or a love of drawing and coloring. Genuine play opportunities do not require criteria for access, such as socioeconomic status or a minimum reading ability. Providing children opportunities to learn through a vehicle such as play-based learning can lead to full participation in a socially co-constructed learning community (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

In a culture of care (Noddings, 2013; Paris, 2016), play can be a pure form of love and acceptance for our youngest learners.

This social enactment aspect of learning encourages genuine interactions between children (Genishi & Dyson, 2012) and adults. “Humanizing relationships of dignity and care are fundamental to student and teacher learning” and necessary to disrupt deficit viewpoints (Paris, 2016, p. 8). Play can provide space for children to share their assets with their classroom communities (Yosso, 2012). It is difficult for children to learn how to interact with one another if they never have opportunities to socialize, cooperate, or disagree. They need time and space to build relationships and develop connections with one another (Genishi & Dyson, 2012; Yosso, 2012), which supports their social development (Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978).

This social support matters in early childhood settings because when children do not have access to play and the competencies that play pedagogies offer young learners, social, emotional, and academic development is obstructed. The absence of social interactions can have a deleterious impact on children, as society has evidenced through the experiences of the closing of schools and early care centers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The in-person return to schools and childcare centers revealed social emotional circumstances for children (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Larivière-Bastien et al., 2022; London, 2020), such as “anxiety, depression, and trauma” (Ladson-Billings, 2021) and required teachers to put an even greater emphasis on building relationships and resocialization.

In addition to the teacher education and hands-on in-service experiences educators have, there are significant outside sociocultural factors that deeply impact what happens inside physical and virtual school walls. These factors greatly impact teacher pedagogy and the development of teachers of play. Through their firmly held beliefs about play and their

commitment to the development of the whole child, the participants embodied and exemplified their pedagogical beliefs in their urban kindergarten classrooms and identified themselves as teachers of play for their students.

This middle circle of my conceptualization of critical play pedagogy builds upon the foundation of honoring childhood and supports the growth of educators to become advocates for play.

### **Identifying as Advocates for Play: The Innermost Circle**

The educators in this study discussed the extent to which their teacher education programs and pre-service teaching experiences prepared them for their first professional, in-service teaching positions and becoming champions of play. All of the participants indicated that play-based learning was at least discussed in their teacher preparation programs, contributing to the development of their pedagogical beliefs around the importance of play and instilling an identity as an advocate committed to providing access to play in their urban kindergarten classrooms.

There are many forms and levels of advocacy in classrooms of young children. I argue for advocacy, especially when it comes to play as a right of all children (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989; Jordan, 2022; UNESCO, 2022). In addition to health, safety, and overall well-being, children deserve to learn in joyful classroom environments that honor their individual assets (Paris, 2012; Yosso, 2005). Children deserve to feel engaged in their learning environments and free of stress and frustration, which can result from strict accountability systems and rigid standardized practices (Fowler, 2018). Thus, there is a need to advocate for a restorying of the school experiences of young children.

As educators, we can only determine what children need when we truly know them as individuals and get to know the unique backgrounds and experiences they bring to the classroom community (Paris, 2012; Yosso, 2012). These understandings of children are discovered through relationships, conversations, and interactions (Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978). Disconnects between the backgrounds of children (e.g., Learners of Color and children of varying abilities) and regimented and homogenized classroom practices (Genishi and Dyson, 2012) can lead to “narrowly focused” (p. 19) classrooms centered on academic achievement and accountability, resulting in a “decrease [in] time and space for imagination and play” (p. 20). To be an advocate, one must have a disposition toward identifying discrepancies and acting to counter inequities.

For example, prescriptive programs such as scripted curricular materials and rigid scope and sequence expectations deny children access to high-quality early childhood programs which support efficacy in one’s learning capabilities, develop joy for meaningful learning experiences (Hatch, 2002), provide choice, and encourage individuality (Genishi & Dyson, 2012). Ladson-Billings (2020) emphasizes that educators need to teach with children, not at them, and to recognize that one’s class is made up of individuals. Stremmel and colleagues (2019) urge, “Good teaching starts with seeing our students as fully human” (p. 177). Seeing students as human requires school systems to abandon “banking” (Freire, 2000) and “factory” (Pinar, 2004) models of education that teach children how to navigate authoritative structures (Apple, 2004). Paris (2016) asserts, “Humanizing relationships of dignity and care are fundamental to student and teacher learning” (p. 8). Advocates recognize the shortcomings of prescriptive programs and work tirelessly to humanize the classroom experience for their learners.

The participants in this study valued the individuality of their students as unique learners on their own distinct educational journeys and navigated prescriptive systems to give their learners opportunities to play and build important relationships. By advocating for time to build relationships and connections with learners, educators countered the prescriptive demands placed on them by school leadership and honored children as individuals, with their own unique backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences, providing spaces for their voices to be heard and their personalities to shine. Identifying as an advocate for play means believing in the value of play for young learners and navigating the perceived trust and expectations for standardization by administrators.

When philosophical and pedagogical stances around the importance of play differ, misalignment exists between the beliefs of educators and the positions of their districts. As found in my study, outside perceptions of early childhood education vary, as there are perspectives that find play and learning to be contentious, believing play to be frivolous rather than foundational (Miller & Almon, 2009). A lack of understanding about the merits of play-based learning by colleagues and school leadership can create undue stress for educators who believe in the value of play (Barblett et al., 2016).

Educators' advocacy and action to incorporate play into their early childhood classrooms despite criticism requires a concerted effort, as play is not just a time-filler, but rather, a rich, stimulating experience that can move learning to new levels. As such, Kalliala (2006) asserts,

Supporting children's play is more active than simply saying you believe that it is important. When children's play culture is taken seriously, the conditions which make it flourish are carefully created. Children's play culture does not just happen naturally. Play needs time and space. It needs mental and material stimulation to be offered in

abundance. Creating a rich play environment means creating good learning environments for children. (p. 139)

Being advocates for play meant the educators in this study understood and promoted the merits of play and made deliberate choices to incorporate play-based learning into their classrooms.

This innermost circle of advocacy is developed from teachers' capacities to honor childhood and develop identities as teachers of play.

### **Research Implications**

The findings that emerged from this study illustrated that educators honored childhood and play culture, developed identities as teachers of play, and advocated for play and play-based learning in their urban kindergarten classrooms. However, the extent to which the teachers were able to put their beliefs into action to provide equitable and accessible learning experiences for their students largely depended on outside factors. The findings in this inquiry hold implications for teacher education programs, school and district administrators, and education policy.

### ***Teacher Education Programs***

The educators in this study noted their teacher education programs impacted their understanding of play and were able to articulate key examples. As noted by Howard (2010), teacher preparation programs instill a sense of preparation, confidence, and knowledge which can impact the extent to which educators incorporate play into their classroom settings. The educators in this study discussed how their teacher preparation programs prepared them for delivering instruction, implementing curriculum, and planning lessons. While some participants mentioned that play was a focus in early childhood coursework, there was a disconnect with what educators actually experienced upon entering the teaching profession. This disconnection is

troubling, as stronger alignment is needed between teacher education and the reality of entering a classroom.

What is the charge of teacher education? Educators are generally powerless regarding the curricular decisions made by their schools and districts, and teacher education programs do not always hold the knowledge about various district curricula that graduates will implement in their new classrooms. Teacher education programs, it seems, most effectively serve teacher candidates when coursework and field experiences accurately represent the content and issues that will be experienced in the candidates' future classrooms.

Teacher candidates would benefit from having discussions and hands-on experiences working with various curricular resources and how to ensure these resources are accessible and responsive for all learners. Throughout candidates' preparation programs they should be guided in developing critical dispositions that ask: Who is being best served by this curriculum? Who is marginalized or excluded from fully accessing the curriculum? Throughout this work, theories and strategies of play-based learning should be folded into and through all aspects of early childhood teacher education programming. In doing so, teacher candidates can engage in building their own pedagogical beliefs about play-based learning. Simultaneously, such an experience would equip educators to commit to and identify as advocates for play-based learning in their future schools and districts, even with administrators and leaders who may be resistant to such practices.

A significant implication for education programs is the need to build competence for future teachers to better understand, support, advocate for, and teach learners from diverse backgrounds and build their practice as culturally sustaining educators (Paris, 2012). Children deserve to have teachers who understand how “cultural differences create a wide variance in

educational curriculum programming, educator/student/parent relationships, and a range of contending social, ethical, and political values” (Murtadha-Watts, 2001, p. 103). Bohn and Sleeter (2000) explain,

When a student who is of a different ethnic, racial, or socioeconomic background from the teacher tunes out from the lessons of the classroom, a teacher with a very limited perspective is likely to blame the child and his or her home life. That is why it is so critically important for teachers to be given ample opportunities to delve into multiculturalism. (p. 158)

Teachers require time for self-examination of their knowledge and filters of cultures other than their own, as they need to be aware of how they perceive, interpret, and respond to behavior.

By transforming teacher education programs, future educators are more effectively equipped to counter and challenge oppressive systems that harm children (Jordan, 2022). It is crucial for educators to find ways to recognize, honor, and celebrate the assets learners embody (Yosso, 2005) when they enter the classroom while encouraging, promoting, and sustaining the ways of being for Learners of Color, their families, and their communities (Paris, 2012). The significance of play in the kindergarten setting is not the same for all children, as some children have more or less access to play outside of the school environment. Opportunities and experiences for play mean different things to different children, thus the need to ensure access to play for all children in early childhood settings.

### ***School and District Administrators***

While educators need to feel prepared to advocate for play and work tirelessly to provide equity and access to play in their classroom communities, the role of the administrator and the trust they emit cannot be ignored. According to Yin and colleagues (2021), kindergarten

principals are major factors in building trustful school cultures where teachers feel supported with their intentions to incorporate play into their classrooms.

The participants in this study all noted having administrators with experiences outside of early childhood education, particularly that of upper elementary, middle school, or even high school teaching credentials. Since administrators are licensed to serve in K-12 settings, their training must extend beyond school finance, education law, and teacher evaluation systems. With such a large span for the administrator license, administration licensure programs have a responsibility to prepare future principals and district leaders with an understanding of developmentally and age-appropriate instruction for the grade levels they may serve.

While a shift in administrator coursework would support future administrators moving forward, currently practicing administrators must be willing to learn about the children they are serving. This learning is required in two major areas: developmentally appropriate instruction and culturally sustaining practices (Paris, 2012). Having district and building leaders who value childhood and promote equitable learning systems is important, especially since administrators are often the moderator between educational policy and practicing educators. How administrators adopt instructional programs and provide teachers with autonomy to meet the needs of their learners can be indicative of deficit perspectives which are harmful to children.

While the educators in this study did not state or imply deficit views of the children in their urban kindergarten classrooms, deficit views of learners in urban school settings by school and district administrators are persistent and fueled by standardized programming. Standardization emphasizes “sameness” (Knowles & Knowles, 2001, p. 392), expecting children to “arrive at the same place at about the same time... moving in lockstep through a series of 10-month years” (Eisner, 2001, p. 372). A deficit mindset by district leaders pushing toward the

standardization of programs negatively impacts the learning opportunities for children and also hinders the educators' ability to implement play, forcing them to shoulder extra energy to incorporate developmentally appropriate instruction for their learners.

When teachers are not provided with autonomy and trust, they are often forced to abide by mandated curriculum packages and “one-size-fits-all standards” (Hatch, 2002, p. 460; Miller & Almon, 2009, p. 15). Curricular mandates and prescribed instructional programs “devalue” (Joseph et al., 2011, p. 45) the training and competence of professional educators and threaten the loss of the “important parts of the role of the teacher” as “intellectual pursuits and art of teaching have been replaced with to-do lists, prepared questions, and ready-chosen topics, literature, and materials” (Mueller & File, 2019, p. 48). The “deprofessionalization” (Hatch, 2002, p. 459) of early childhood educators occurs through standardization and adoption of prescribed curricular packages, which strip teachers of their ability to make instructional decisions, act on their professional judgements, and conveys the notion they cannot be trusted to effectively teach their learners (Hatch, 2002; Joseph et al., 2011) on their own accord.

It is especially important for district and school administrators to treat educators as professionals if they wish to retain teachers. In a nationwide survey of 830 teachers in May of 2022 conducted by Marshall and colleagues (2022), “more than three-fourths (76.4%) of teachers surveyed considered leaving their position during the 2021-2022 school year” with more than half looking at non-teaching positions (p. 8). According to the respondents, reasons for dissatisfaction included suffering morale, increased pressure placed on teachers who remain after colleagues leave, and mental health concerns. However, teachers who perceived respect and trust from parents and school leaders and felt empowered to make decisions about their teaching found their jobs to be more satisfying.

District and school administrators play a pivotal role in how instruction is implemented by teachers and how school is experienced by children. With equitable and accessible learning environments, we need future and seasoned administrators to be well-versed in what developmentally appropriate instruction entails, lead with equity-oriented perspectives, and treat educators as professionals.

### ***Education Policy***

Education policymakers have a responsibility to prioritize equitable access to developmentally appropriate instruction for our nation's youngest learners. As the teachers in this study articulated, kindergarten is foundational to cognitive, social, emotional, and academic skill development that support children's future learning endeavors. Rather than inundating kindergarteners with standards and assessments, teachers should have the autonomy to provide their students with play-based learning experiences that enable them to discover the world, cultivate curiosity, and promote a joy of learning.

Changes to how education policy is established and adopted would address the need for sociocultural perspective on education policy. Levinson and Sutton (2001) note, "A deeply cultural approach to educational policy has yet to be developed. Such an approach can and should develop in dialogue with existing studies to chart out new tools for research and change" (p. 4). According to Hinnant-Crawford (2019), "Education policy in the United States has a history of being packaged in rhetoric about equality, the common good, and self-actualization while granting access to some and denying it to others" (p. 4). While schools in the U.S. are comprised mostly of Children of Color, federal policies and practices are "centered largely on White, middle-class, monocultural, and monolingual (and cis-hetero-patriarchal-ableist) norms of educational achievement" (Paris, 2016).

A cultural approach to education policy would involve robust dialogue, encourage research, and offer cultural and critical perspectives aimed at challenging assumptions that underlie policies, while calling to mind the perspectives and concerns of the people the policies ultimately impact (Levinson & Sutton, 2001).

As a nation, we must move beyond rhetoric, toward action. A shift in educational policy is crucial for children, especially policies regarding play and access to developmentally appropriate instruction. Play-based approaches are an important aspect of a young child's learning. As such, the United Nations has declared play experiences to be a child's human right in Article 31 (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). UNESCO (2022) asserts the idea that "quality education, including early childhood education, is a fundamental human right – one of society's great equalizers and a foundation for tolerance, peace, human rights and sustainability" (p. 6). As noted in the literature, play supports equitable access to instruction because it occurs outside of ability and background (Taylor & Boyer, 2020) and provides the opportunity for children to learn on common ground (Nixon & Gutiérrez, 2008). If play serves as a vehicle to so many important outcomes, why do early childhood teachers have to advocate for its time and place in the classroom?

While the educators in this study worked to incorporate play-based learning in their urban kindergarten classrooms, the barriers and obstacles they faced largely stemmed from accountability measures and quests for standardization, which resulted from the adoption of educational policies. Joseph and colleagues (2011) likened schooling to a business model, focusing on "preparation for the workplace" (p. 44) and promotion of economic well-being, resulting in a mission for schools to pass standardized tests rather than develop well-rounded individuals. They state, "The narrowing of curriculum springs from a circular logic beginning

with the association of high standards with standardized curriculum, thus leading to standardized tests as the prime means of measuring student achievement of standards” (p. 46).

Reducing rich, meaningful, and joyful experiences to narrow lessons and standards-based approaches limits the scope of learning and “robs young children of the joy of discovering how much they can learn and just how fulfilling school experiences can be” (Hatch, 2002, p. 459). The narrowing of curriculum dictates what is tested and therefore what is taught, thus marginalizing students “whose aptitudes and interests lie elsewhere” (Eisner, 2001, p. 372). This is troublesome, as the factory model of education does not encourage children to thrive outside the predetermined box.

Policymakers must find ways to balance accountability systems with developmentally appropriate instruction for the sake of young learners. As Hinnant-Crawford (2019) urged, “Without symbiosis between accountability and teaching, the outcomes of well-intended policy goals will continue to have detrimental instructional consequences.” These consequences directly impact our most valuable and vulnerable assets to our future society: young children.

### **Model of Critical Play Pedagogy**

Throughout the analysis of the findings and a reflection of the discussion and implications of this study, I have conceptualized a model of critical play pedagogy. This model is not meant for broad generalization, yet it is offered as an example of a specific representation of how play can be imagined through a critical perspective.

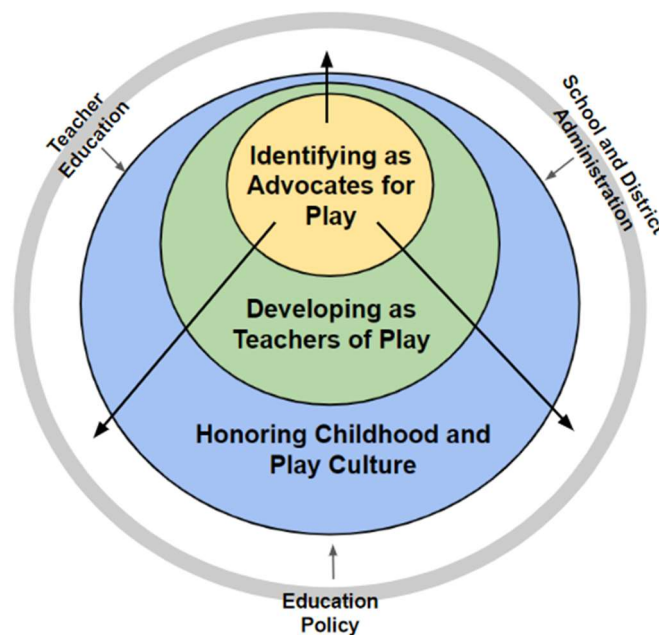
Within my study, I identified three aspects of play pedagogy that I deemed supportive of critical play approaches. The aspects included, (1) honoring childhood and play culture, (2) developing identities as teachers of play, and (3) identifying as advocates for play and play-based learning. The critical play pedagogy conceptualization consists of three concentric circles: The

outermost blue circle illustrated the aspect of honoring childhood and play culture, the mid-level green circle indicated the development of identities as teachers of play, and the yellow innermost circle signified educators identifying as advocates for play.

These aspects exist within a teacher’s realm of knowledge and disposition, yet do not exist isolated from other factors and conditions of life. There are real and persistent factors outside of school walls that deeply impact and influence classroom decisions. These factors, discussed in the research implications, include teacher education, school and district administration, and education policy. Figure 8 illustrates these factors as external forces acting upon the aspects of play pedagogy to create a model of understanding critical play pedagogy. Although not addressed in this study, and an area of further inquiry, I would argue that this model should be visualized against the backdrop of the many sociocultural factors that greatly impact school experiences.

**Figure 8**

*Model of Critical Play Pedagogy*



To visualize the persistent and ever-changing forces the teachers described as influencing and impacting their ability to incorporate play, I depicted a gray ring surrounding the nested circles with three arrows showing movement on the aspects of critical play pedagogy. In the case of this study, these forces (i.e., teacher education, school and district administration, and education policy) directly and indirectly impacted the educators' abilities to make instructional decisions regarding play in their classrooms. Teacher education, school and district administration, and education policy are influential factors that, to varying degrees, act on play pedagogies and also influence one another (represented by being connected in the same gray ring). The three aspects of critical play pedagogy as they are acted upon by the persistent forces impacting play, comprise the model of critical play pedagogy.

Just as the teachers evidenced in my study, I imagine educators for critical play pedagogy reacting and responding to the forces upon play by pushing back on these factors, as represented by the outward directing arrows. Educators push back on outside factors for a number of reasons (i.e., protecting play, informing others as advocates for play-based learning, and/or collaborating in attempts to expand play knowledge/dispositions), depending on the strength and type of force being imposed. For example, the adoption of a new literacy program in a school district may cause school administrators to require teachers to abide by a predetermined daily schedule and stay on pace with the program's scope and sequence documents. Depending on their perceived level of autonomy, teachers may find ways to engage their learners while still meeting program expectations. They might do this through the incorporation of play-based centers, reorganizing units to be more thematic, and include movement, hands-on activities, and social interactions to encourage learner engagement.

## **Recommendations for Further Study**

This study on the pedagogical beliefs of educators about the implementation of play-based learning in their urban kindergarten classrooms offers opportunities for future research. Since this inquiry was limited by scope, size, and time, as well as being a dissertation study, there are several opportunities for this research to be expanded upon.

One opportunity for future research would be in a comparison of academic outcomes between classrooms which incorporate play-based learning and those that utilize more traditional learning methods (i.e., whole group instruction, workbooks). This idea was sparked by Camille's experience overhauling her kindergarten learning environment to incorporate play. She shared that at the end of the school year, their test scores and reading levels were higher than the kindergarten classrooms which utilized more traditional approaches.

Another opportunity for study would be to determine if there is a correlation between access to play and behavior referrals. In my experience as an educator, a common statement made by parents, teachers, and administrators is the noticing of an increase in behaviors including aggression, lack of attention/focus, and interpersonal conflict. An opportunity may be to conduct a longitudinal study of children who have access to play-based learning with ample opportunities to develop social skills, conflict resolution, executive functioning, and self-regulation in their early childhood years and children who do not. Noting children's early childhood programming and determining if there is a correlation between programming and behavioral outcomes may shed some light on the behavioral outcomes play can support. Perhaps such a study would ignite change in perceptions and policy in favor of early childhood experiences and help "outsiders" see the value in play. Finally, as I note within the study,

multiple perspectives of play-based learning should be examined against the backdrop of the many sociocultural factors that significantly impact school experiences.

In a similar vein, it may be valuable to gather children's perceptions of their school environments. Gaining an understanding of how our youngest learners perceive school, internalize teachings, and build their efficacy as learners could be insightful to better supporting students through age and developmentally appropriate instructional practices.

An additional opportunity for study would be to determine if the background of administrators influences their perceptions of play and the ability for educators working in their schools to implement play-based learning in their classrooms. With administrators leading schools and being largely responsible for the climate, culture, and perceived sense of trust and support within their buildings, knowing if and how their background influences their stance on play may be helpful in promoting play-based learning in the future.

To summarize, there is a need for further inquiry beyond the scope of this dissertation research. If early childhood educators want administrators and policymakers to value and encourage play, having concrete data on the academic and behavioral outcomes may spark conversation and change in those arenas. Additionally, gaining the valuable insights of children, both young and old, and their perceptions of school can illuminate their experiences and amplify their voices, to hopefully enact change in our nation's schools.

### **Critical Reflection on the Examination of Kindergarten Teachers and Play**

The culmination of this inquiry on educators' experiences with the implementation of play-based learning in urban kindergarten classrooms brought about an opportunity to critically reflect on this research endeavor. Through the lens of my critical framing of this study (Genishi

& Dyson, 2012; Paris, 2012; Yosso, 2005), I have reflected on the findings and discussion points to deepen my exploration of just play-based practices in urban kindergarten settings.

Engaging in conversations with the participants of this study highlighted many similarities amongst them, particularly with regard to their deeply held beliefs on the importance of play, benefits of play for young learners, and how they navigated their roles in order to incorporate play into their kindergarten classrooms to the best of their abilities. I am left wondering, however, about why the educators' experiences were so different from one another. I am reflecting on whether it was the teachers' dispositions that instilled confidence and assertiveness leading to more successful advocacy for play, or if the restrictions administration placed on teacher autonomy to incorporate play had an impact. Camille was able to disrupt the play/learning binary by infusing play into her kindergarten learning environment, while Lauren felt bound to curricular programs and had to find ways to sneak play into her classroom. It seems that when school districts do not see play as an appropriate avenue for learning, restrictions are placed upon teachers as to how they facilitate instruction, placing play and learning at odds with one another.

Although the focus of the findings settled on teacher identity and decision-making, I am compelled to center the rights of children to access play (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989; Jordan, 2022; UNESCO, 2022) and what it means for a child to have the right to meaningful play experiences. In order to advocate for play in early childhood classrooms, teachers need to first be aware of the right for children to play and understand how play benefits young children (Bodrova & Leong, 2005; Bongiorno, 2018; Epstein, 2014; Mielonen & Paterson, 2009; Montroy et al., 2016; Vogt et al., 2018; Wood, 2014; Yogman et al., 2018; Zosh et al., 2022). With this knowledge and building of dispositions, teachers are more likely to voice

their concerns of how schools have become more centered on data and test scores (Roberts-Holmes & Bradbury, 2016) than on children and offering play-based learning experiences (Bassok et al., 2016; Genishi & Dyson, 2012; Nicolopoulou, 2010). Educators, then, are more prepared to stand up to school boards, administrators, and parents as they argue for children's right to play, demand autonomy over classroom instruction, and reclaim professionalization of their field.

I also pause to reflect upon the recruitment experience that occurred within this study. While I am thankful to the three participants who engaged with me throughout this process, I acknowledge our conversations were narrowed by the homogeneous makeup of the group. As four individuals (me as the researcher and the three participants) who identified as white women in their forties, our engagement (i.e., how questions were posed, interpreted, and responded to) were undoubtedly shaped by our white lenses and our worldviews. Had I been able to recruit participants whose backgrounds more closely reflected the children being served, the conversations, definitions of play, and experiences likely would have unfolded differently and cast a greater light on inequities children experience with regard to accessing play.

I have also considered why school and district administrators leading in urban school settings and primarily serving Children of Color and children from families experiencing poverty declined my requests to engage with their teachers about play. My intention to study play seemed to be received as if it were a taboo topic. Perhaps not allowing me into schools was indicative of what was not happening (i.e., play), and school and district leaders did not want that to be known to an outside researcher, further demonstrating that school systems do not seem to align play with learning. When districts do not allow, encourage, or promote play-based learning, they

communicate a message that joyful play-related experiences are not what support academic achievement.

The reflections that arose throughout this research experience may be cause for further inquiry on the topic of play in urban kindergarten classrooms. My reflections help me to consider how I might approach such a topic in the future, outline implications for teachers and children, and pose to the field of education ponderings we must consider as we strive to improve the educational experiences of our youngest learners.

### **Final Thoughts**

The purpose of this inquiry was to better understand the experiences of educators with their implementation of play-based learning in urban kindergarten classrooms. Utilizing a phenomenological case study design through a hermeneutic lens embraced the lived experiences of the participants (Adams & van Manen, 2008; Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Creswell, 2014; Farrell, 2020; Neubauer et al., 2019; Østergaard et al., 2008; Webb & Welsh, 2019) and gave voice (Sloan & Bowe, 2014) to the educators through their participation in this inquiry. The hermeneutic approach involved the collaboration between the educators and myself to engage in a co-construction of knowledge, accomplished through exploring their experiences, discussing their individual, unique truths, and reflecting upon their own backgrounds and contexts (Webb & Welsh, 2019).

Throughout this process, I also reflected on my positionality as an educator and the implications of this inquiry on young children learning in urban school settings. As a white, female researcher and early childhood educator in my 40s with participants who also identified as white, female, and in their 40s, I acknowledge the interpretations of play throughout this dissertation were white centered. Additionally, the viewpoints shared by the participants about

their experiences were provided through the white, female lens. Beyond Camille explicitly mentioning a multicultural foundations course and how it prepared her to teach children with backgrounds different from her own, none of the participants discussed acknowledging, honoring, and/or bringing their young learners' lived experiences into the classroom setting through play. Thus, I am completing this phase of my work reflecting on unanswered questions related to voices and perspectives yet to be discovered. Defining and conceptualizing play proves to be an elusive task (Yogman et al., 2018), as play is nuanced in each community of learners, capturing the essence of urban school settings (Milner, 2012b).

A theme throughout this dissertation study has been the importance of early childhood and play experiences for young children. This study addressed the reality of early childhood programming, which has essentially pushed the child off the swings and into neat rows and boxes, placing expectations onto them that will continue throughout their educational journeys. Brought to life through the voices of three educators, findings of advocacy, commitment, and honor rang through this study. Maintaining educators' voices throughout inquiries, such as this, supports the telling of teachers' stories and experiences, bringing their individual journeys to light.

While this research offers only a small sampling of teacher experiences, the participants in this study were passionate about their beliefs about early childhood and how young children should learn. I imagine their sentiments may be echoed by other early childhood educators throughout the nation, each navigating their own path and journey, facing encouragement and barriers, to help the young learners who move through their classrooms each year to the best of their abilities. Building educators' capacities as culturally sustaining practitioners and embodying that work myself is crucial to promote equitable systems and provide access to play-

based learning for all children. As a passionate and practicing educator myself, I hope that someday, sooner than later, we can recenter the *child* as the primary focus of early childhood education.

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**Appendix A: Common Core State Standards for Kindergarten for English Language Arts (ELA)**

(adapted from National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010a)

<b>Reading: Literature</b>	
<i>Key Ideas and Details:</i>	
RL.K.1	With prompting and support, ask and answer questions about key details in a text
RL.K.2	With prompting and support, retell familiar stories, including key details.
RL.K.3	With prompting and support, identify characters, settings, and major events in a story.
<i>Craft and Structure:</i>	
RL.K.4	Ask and answer questions about unknown words in a text.
RL.K.5	Recognize common types of texts (e.g., storybooks, poems).
RL.K.6	With prompting and support, name the author and illustrator of a story and define the role of each in telling the story.
<i>Integration of Knowledge and Ideas:</i>	
RL.K.7	With prompting and support, describe the relationship between illustrations and the story in which they appear (e.g., what moment in a story an illustration depicts).
RL.K.8	(RL.K.8 not applicable to literature)
RL.K.9	With prompting and support, compare and contrast the adventures and experiences of characters in familiar stories.
<i>Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity:</i>	
RL.K.10	Actively engage in group reading activities with purpose and understanding.
<b>Reading: Informational Text</b>	
<i>Key Ideas and Details:</i>	
RI.K.1	With prompting and support, ask and answer questions about key details in a text.

RI.K.2	With prompting and support, identify the main topic and retell key details of a text.	
RI.K.3	With prompting and support, describe the connection between two individuals, events, ideas, or pieces of information in a text.	
<i>Craft and Structure:</i>		
RI.K.4	With prompting and support, ask and answer questions about unknown words in a text.	
RI.K.5	Identify the front cover, back cover, and title page of a book.	
RI.K.6	Name the author and illustrator of a text and define the role of each in presenting the ideas or information in a text.	
<i>Integration of Knowledge and Ideas:</i>		
RI.K.7	With prompting and support, describe the relationship between illustrations and the text in which they appear (e.g., what person, place, thing, or idea in the text an illustration depicts).	
RI.K.8	With prompting and support, identify the reasons an author gives to support points in a text.	
RI.K.9	With prompting and support, identify basic similarities in and differences between two texts on the same topic (e.g., in illustrations, descriptions, or procedures).	
<i>Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity:</i>		
RI.K.10	Actively engage in group reading activities with purpose and understanding.	
<b>Reading: Foundational Skills</b>		
<i>Print Concepts:</i>		
RF.K.1	Demonstrate understanding of the organization and basic features of print.	
	RF.K.1.A	Follow words from left to right, top to bottom, and page by page.
	RF.K.1.B	Recognize that spoken words are represented in written language by specific sequences of letters.
	RF.K.1.C	Understand that words are separated by spaces in print.
	RF.K.1.D	Recognize and name all upper- and lowercase letters of the alphabet.
<i>Phonological Awareness:</i>		

RF.K.2	Demonstrate understanding of spoken words, syllables, and sounds (phonemes).	
	RF.K.2.A	Recognize and produce rhyming words.
	RF.K.2.B	Count, pronounce, blend, and segment syllables in spoken words.
	RF.K.2.C	Blend and segment onsets and rimes of single-syllable spoken words.
	RF.K.2.D	Isolate and pronounce the initial, medial vowel, and final sounds (phonemes) in three-phoneme (consonant-vowel-consonant, or CVC) words. <sup>1</sup> (This does not include CVCs ending with /l/, /r/, or /x/.)
	RF.K.2.E	Add or substitute individual sounds (phonemes) in simple, one-syllable words to make new words.
<i>Phonics and Word Recognition:</i>		
RF.K.3	Know and apply grade-level phonics and word analysis skills in decoding words.	
	RF.K.3.A	Demonstrate basic knowledge of one-to-one letter-sound correspondences by producing the primary sound or many of the most frequent sounds for each consonant.
	RF.K.3.B	Associate the long and short sounds with the common spellings (graphemes) for the five major vowels.
	RF.K.3.C	Read common high-frequency words by sight (e.g., <i>the, of, to, you, she, my, is, are, do, does</i> ).
	RF.K.3.D	Distinguish between similarly spelled words by identifying the sounds of the letters that differ.
<i>Fluency:</i>		
RF.K.4	Read emergent-reader texts with purpose and understanding.	
<b>Writing</b>		
<i>Text Types and Purposes:</i>		
W.K.1	Use a combination of drawing, dictating, and writing to compose opinion pieces in which they tell a reader the topic or the name of the book they are writing about and state an opinion or preference about the topic or book (e.g., <i>My favorite book is...</i> ).	
W.K.2	Use a combination of drawing, dictating, and writing to compose informative/explanatory texts in which they name what they are writing about and supply some information about the topic.	

W.K.3	Use a combination of drawing, dictating, and writing to narrate a single event or several loosely linked events, tell about the events in the order in which they occurred, and provide a reaction to what happened.	
<i>Production and Distribution of Writing:</i>		
W.K.4	(W.K.4 begins in grade 3)	
W.K.5	With guidance and support from adults, respond to questions and suggestions from peers and add details to strengthen writing as needed.	
W.K.6	With guidance and support from adults, explore a variety of digital tools to produce and publish writing, including in collaboration with peers.	
<i>Research to Build and Present Knowledge:</i>		
W.K.7	Participate in shared research and writing projects (e.g., explore a number of books by a favorite author and express opinions about them).	
W.K.8	With guidance and support from adults, recall information from experiences or gather information from provided sources to answer a question.	
W.K.9	(W.K.9 begins in grade 4)	
<i>Range of Writing:</i>		
W.K.10	(W.K.10 begins in grade 3)	
<b>Speaking &amp; Listening</b>		
<i>Comprehension and Collaboration:</i>		
SL.K.1	Participate in collaborative conversations with diverse partners about kindergarten topics and texts with peers and adults in small and larger groups.	
	SL.K.1.A	Follow agreed-upon rules for discussions (e.g., listening to others and taking turns speaking about the topics and texts under discussion).
	SL.K.1.B	Continue a conversation through multiple exchanges.
SL.K.2	Confirm understanding of a text read aloud or information presented orally or through other media by asking and answering questions about key details and requesting clarification if something is not understood.	
SL.K.3	Ask and answer questions in order to seek help, get information, or clarify something that is not understood.	
<i>Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas:</i>		

SL.K.4	Describe familiar people, places, things, and events and, with prompting and support, provide additional detail.	
SL.K.5	Add drawings or other visual displays to descriptions as desired to provide additional detail.	
SL.K.6	Speak audibly and express thoughts, feelings, and ideas clearly.	
<b>Language</b>		
<i>Conventions of Standard English:</i>		
L.K.1	Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.	
	L.K.1.A	Print many upper- and lowercase letters.
	L.K.1.B	Use frequently occurring nouns and verbs.
	L.K.1.C	Form regular plural nouns orally by adding /s/ or /es/ (e.g., <i>dog, dogs; wish, wishes</i> ).
	L.K.1.D	Understand and use question words (interrogatives) (e.g., <i>who, what, where, when, why, how</i> ).
	L.K.1.E	Use the most frequently occurring prepositions (e.g., <i>to, from, in, out, on, off, for, of, by, with</i> ).
	L.K.1.F	Produce and expand complete sentences in shared language activities.
L.K.2	Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.	
	L.K.2.A	Capitalize the first word in a sentence and the pronoun <i>I</i>
	L.K.2.B	Recognize and name end punctuation.
	L.K.2.C	Write a letter or letters for most consonant and short-vowel sounds (phonemes).
	L.K.2.D	Spell simple words phonetically, drawing on knowledge of sound-letter relationships.
<i>Knowledge of Language:</i>		
L.K.3	(L.K.3 begins in grade 2)	
<i>Vocabulary Acquisition and Use:</i>		

L.K.4	Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on kindergarten reading and content.	
	L.K.4.A	Identify new meanings for familiar words and apply them accurately (e.g., knowing <i>duck</i> is a bird and learning the verb to <i>duck</i> ).
	L.K.4.B	Use the most frequently occurring inflections and affixes (e.g., <i>-ed</i> , <i>-s</i> , <i>re-</i> , <i>un-</i> , <i>pre-</i> , <i>-ful</i> , <i>-less</i> ) as a clue to the meaning of an unknown word.
L.K.5	With guidance and support from adults, explore word relationships and nuances in word meanings.	
	L.K.5.A	Sort common objects into categories (e.g., shapes, foods) to gain a sense of the concepts the categories represent.
	L.K.5.B	Demonstrate understanding of frequently occurring verbs and adjectives by relating them to their opposites (antonyms).
	L.K.5.C	Identify real-life connections between words and their use (e.g., note places at school that are colorful).
	L.K.5.D	Distinguish shades of meaning among verbs describing the same general action (e.g., <i>walk</i> , <i>march</i> , <i>strut</i> , <i>prance</i> ) by acting out the meanings.
L.K.6	Use words and phrases acquired through conversations, reading and being read to, and responding to texts.	

## Appendix B: Common Core State Standards for Kindergarten for Mathematics

(adapted from National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010b)

<b>Counting and Cardinality</b>	
<i>Know number names and the count sequence.</i>	
K.CC.A.1	Count to 100 by ones and tens.
K.CC.A.2	Count forward beginning from a given number within the known sequence (instead of having to begin at 1).
K.CC.A.3	Write numbers from 0 to 20. Represent a number of objects with a written numeral 0-20 (with 0 representing a count of no objects).
<i>Count to tell the number of objects.</i>	
K.CC.B.4	Understand the relationship between numbers and quantities; connect counting to cardinality.
	K.CC.B.4.A: When counting objects, say the number names in the standard order, pairing each object with one and only one number name and each number name with one and only one object.
	K.CC.B.4.B: Understand that the last number name said tells the number of objects counted. The number of objects is the same regardless of their arrangement or the order in which they were counted.
	K.CC.B.4.C: Understand that each successive number name refers to a quantity that is one larger.
K.CC.B.5	Count to answer "how many?" questions about as many as 20 things arranged in a line, a rectangular array, or a circle, or as many as 10 things in a scattered configuration; given a number from 1-20, count out that many objects.
<i>Compare numbers.</i>	
K.CC.C.6	Identify whether the number of objects in one group is greater than, less than, or equal to the number of objects in another group, e.g., by using matching and counting strategies (include groups with up to ten objects).
K.CC.C.7	Compare two numbers between 1 and 10 presented as written numerals.
<b>Operations and Algebraic Thinking</b>	

<i>Understand addition as putting together and adding to, and understand subtraction as taking apart and taking from.</i>	
K.OA.A.1	Represent addition and subtraction with objects, fingers, mental images, drawings <sup>1</sup> , sounds (e.g., claps), acting out situations, verbal explanations, expressions, or equations.
K.OA.A.2	Solve addition and subtraction word problems, and add and subtract within 10, e.g., by using objects or drawings to represent the problem.
K.OA.A.3	Decompose numbers less than or equal to 10 into pairs in more than one way, e.g., by using objects or drawings, and record each decomposition by a drawing or equation (e.g., $5 = 2 + 3$ and $5 = 4 + 1$ ).
K.OA.A.4	For any number from 1 to 9, find the number that makes 10 when added to the given number, e.g., by using objects or drawings, and record the answer with a drawing or equation.
K.OA.A.5	Fluently add and subtract within 5.
<b>Numbers and Operations in Base Ten</b>	
<i>Work with numbers 11-19 to gain foundations for place value.</i>	
K.NBT.A.1	Compose and decompose numbers from 11 to 19 into ten ones and some further ones, e.g., by using objects or drawings, and record each composition or decomposition by a drawing or equation (such as $18 = 10 + 8$ ); understand that these numbers are composed of ten ones and one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, or nine ones.
<b>Measurement &amp; Data</b>	
<i>Describe and compare measurable attributes.</i>	
K.MD.A.1	Describe measurable attributes of objects, such as length or weight. Describe several measurable attributes of a single object.
K.MD.A.2	Directly compare two objects with a measurable attribute in common, to see which object has "more of"/"less of" the attribute, and describe the difference. For example, directly compare the heights of two children and describe one child as taller/shorter.
<i>Classify objects and count the number of objects in each category.</i>	
K.MD.B.3	Classify objects into given categories; count the numbers of objects in each category and sort the categories by count.
<b>Geometry</b>	

<i>Identify and describe shapes.</i>	
K.G.A.1	Describe objects in the environment using names of shapes, and describe the relative positions of these objects using terms such as above, below, beside, in front of, behind, and next to.
K.G.A.2	Correctly name shapes regardless of their orientations or overall size.
K.G.A.3	Identify shapes as two-dimensional (lying in a plane, "flat") or three-dimensional ("solid").
<i>Analyze, compare, create, and compose shapes.</i>	
K.G.B.4	Analyze and compare two- and three-dimensional shapes, in different sizes and orientations, using informal language to describe their similarities, differences, parts (e.g., number of sides and vertices/"corners") and other attributes (e.g., having sides of equal length).
K.G.B.5	Model shapes in the world by building shapes from components (e.g., sticks and clay balls) and drawing shapes.
K.G.B.6	Compose simple shapes to form larger shapes. <i>For example, "Can you join these two triangles with full sides touching to make a rectangle?"</i>

## Appendix C: IRB Approval Letter and Amendment Approval



### Institutional Review Board

uwm.edu/irb  
irbinfo@uwm.edu  
414-662-3544

**Date:** January 24, 2024

**To:** Leanne Evans  
**Dept:** Urban Education  
**CC:** Sarah St Martin - Co-Investigator

**IRB #:** 24.133  
**Title:** Educators' Experiences with the Implementation of Play-Based Learning in Urban Kindergarten Classrooms

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Institutional Review Board has granted your protocol Exempt Status under Category 1 as governed by 45 CFR 46.104(d).

This exemption determination is valid for three years and will expire on **January 23, 2027**. Before the expiration date, you will receive an email explaining how to either keep the study open or close it. If the study is completed before the expiration date, you may notify the IRB by sending an email to [irbinfo@uwm.edu](mailto:irbinfo@uwm.edu).

Any proposed changes to the protocol must be reviewed by the IRB before implementation, unless the change is specifically necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects.

It is your responsibility to:

- follow the IRB-approved protocol as written
- promptly report unanticipated problems to the IRB
- maintain proper documentation of study records
- ensure that all study staff receive appropriate training as outlined in the protocol
- adhere to the policies and guidelines set forth by the IRB, UWM, and the UW System, and to all applicable state and federal laws

Contact the IRB office if you have any further questions. Thank you for your cooperation and best wishes for a successful project.



## Institutional Review Board

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uwm.edu/irb  
irbinfo@uwm.edu  
414-662-3544

**Date:** March 27, 2024

**To:** Leanne Evans  
**Dept:** Urban Education  
**CC:** Sarah St Martin - Co-Investigator

**IRB #:** 24.133

**Title:** Educators' Experiences with the Implementation of Play-Based Learning in Urban Kindergarten Classrooms

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Institutional Review Board has approved the following changes to your protocol:

- Including participants who formerly taught kindergarten.
- Change in recruitment plans.
- Remove observation from activities.
- Add document review.

**Review level:** Exempt

As a reminder, this study's IRB approval will expire on **January 23, 2027**. Before the expiration date, you will receive an email explaining how to either keep the study open or close it.

Any proposed changes to the protocol must be reviewed by the IRB before implementation, unless the change is specifically necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects.

It is your responsibility to:

- follow the IRB-approved protocol as written
- promptly report unanticipated problems to the IRB
- maintain proper documentation of study records
- ensure that all study staff receive appropriate training as outlined in the protocol
- adhere to the policies and guidelines set forth by the IRB, UWM, and the UW System, and to all applicable state and federal laws

Contact the IRB office if you have any further questions. Thank you for your cooperation and best wishes for a successful project.

## Appendix D: Detailed Questionnaire with Demographic Form

Thank you for participating in this study. As a reminder, participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

You may skip any question(s) included in this questionnaire if you feel uncomfortable answering/responding to a particular item.

### Participant Demographic Form

The information you provide will be used to accurately, appropriately, and respectfully describe you as a participant in this study. All information will be de-identified. Your name and school setting will be replaced with pseudonyms. Your responses below will help with the de-identification process. All responses will be kept on a password-secured computer.

#### Please indicate your age (in years):

20-29       30-39       40-49       50-59       60+

#### Gender with which you identify:

Female                                       Prefer to self-describe \_\_\_\_\_  
 Male     Prefer not to disclose  
 Non-binary/Third gender/Transgender

Preferred Pronouns: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Your Ethnic/Racial Group:

African     Middle Eastern  
 American Indian/Alaskan Native       Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander  
 Asian     White  
 Bi/Multiracial                                       Prefer to self-describe \_\_\_\_\_  
 Black/African American                       Prefer not to disclose  
 Hispanic/Latin(o)(a)(x)/Spanish Origin

Likert Scale Questions (with open response opportunities)

1. Please rate yourself 1 to 4 (1: strongly disagree; 2: disagree; 3: agree; 4: strongly agree). I believe...
  - a. kindergarten should be...
    - i. highly structured with rigid routines and schedules
    - ii. mainly academically focused with extended blocks of time for literacy and math each day
    - iii. Please provide your rationale for your rating(s) in this section.
  - b. play should be...
    - i. earned or rewarded for “good” behavior
    - ii. experienced each day for a minimum amount of time
    - iii. incorporated into the learning environment
    - iv. Please provide your rationale for your rating(s) in this section.
  - c. standardization is necessary so all children leave kindergarten with the same expectations
    - i. Please provide your rationale for your rating(s) in this section.
  - d. the purpose of kindergarten is to learn how to “do” school”
    - i. Please provide your rationale for your rating(s) in this section.
2. Please rate yourself 1 to 4 (with 1 indicating that you are unable to make any instructional decisions and must follow curricula to fidelity and 4 indicating that curricula are available as a resource but the educator is able to have full autonomy over instructional decisions). As a teacher...
  - a. To what extent are you able to exercise autonomy over instructional decisions (e.g. what is taught, when it is taught)?
  - b. To what extent are you able to determine your daily schedule?
  - c. To what extent are you able to make adjustments to your scope and sequence?
  - d. To what extent are you able to decide how concepts are taught (e.g. you must use the workbook/provided materials, as long as concepts are taught you are able to decide how instruction is facilitated)
  - e. Please provide your rationale for your rating(s) in this section.
3. Please rate yourself 1 to 4 (with 1 indicating that play is a scheduled block of time and/or used as a reward and 4 implying that play is integrated into instruction on a daily basis). In your classroom...
  - a. To what extent are you able to incorporate play-based learning experiences into your school day?
  - b. To what extent is play-time, choice time, recess, etc. used as a reward?
  - c. To what extent would you say the ability for learners to play depends on their behavior?
  - d. Please provide your rationale for your rating(s) in this section.

## Appendix E: Interview Guide

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me today. Do I have your permission to (audio and/or video) record this conversation?

As a reminder, participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. At any point, if you are feeling discomfort, you have the right to pause or end the session. You also have the right to skip any questions you are uncomfortable answering.

Do you have any questions before we begin the interview?

### ***Background***

1. Could you please tell me about your path to becoming an educator?
  - a. How many years have you been in education?
    - i. How many years have you taught kindergarten?
    - ii. What other grades have you taught?
  - b. How long have you been in your current role?
2. To what extent do you feel your teacher education experience (i.e. college/university coursework) prepared you for your current role?
  - a. Please compare/contrast your preparation experience to your current context.
  - b. How was the topic of play addressed in your teacher preparation program?

### ***Current Role/Context***

3. Does your school/district have an adopted reading curriculum? If so, what program is used?
4. Does your school/district have an adopted writing curriculum? If so, what program is used?
5. Does your school/district have an adopted mathematics curriculum? If so, what program is used?
6. How would you describe your experience in your current position?
7. What are some positives of your current position?
  - a. If needed: Can you tell me more about how that positively impacts your work with children?
8. What are some challenges of your current position?
  - a. If needed: Can you tell me more about how that challenge becomes a barrier to your work with children?
  - b. Can you provide me with an example?
9. How would you describe your school/district expectations for how instruction should look?
  - a. What does your district encourage/promote?
  - b. What are your district's current directives/initiatives?
    - i. consider professional development topics, new program adoption, etc.
    - ii. What are your thoughts on the directives/initiatives you mentioned?

- iii. How have these directives influenced your classroom/instructional decisions?
10. As an early childhood educator, what are your beliefs about how kindergarten-aged students should learn?
  11. How do you define play within the context of an early childhood classroom?
  12. How would you describe play-based learning?
  13. How would you describe your school/district stance on play-based learning?
  14. What does your typical daily schedule look like?
  15. What are your feelings about the current state of early childhood education?

**Appendix F: Context Notes Sheet/Analytic Memo Template**

<b>Cataloguing Information</b>	
Initiative:	
University:	
Day, Date, Time:	
Length of Interview:	
In Person/Phone/Zoom:	
Location of Respondent:	
Location of Interviewer:	
<b>Demographics</b>	
Gender:	
Race:	
De-Identified?:	
Overall Interview Rating (Excellent, Average, Poor):	
<b>Project Management</b>	
Transcribed by:	
Edited by:	
Finalized on:	

**Context Notes:**

*Entrée, Setting, and Respondent:*

**Overall Important Themes:**

**Quotable Quotes:**

**Areas for Improvement (Interview Guide, Set-Up, etc.):**

**Links to Other Respondents:**

**Analytic Comment:**

## Appendix G: Focus Group Conversation Guide

Thank you for coming together to be a part of this focus group. Do I have your permission to (audio and/or video) record this session?

As a reminder, participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. At any point, if you are feeling discomfort, you have the right to pause or end the session. You also have the right to skip any questions you are uncomfortable answering.

Do you have any questions before we begin the focus group?

### Introductions

- Name
- Overview of education experience
  - Time spent teaching kindergarten
- How do you define play? Play-based learning?
- What are your beliefs around play-based learning in kindergarten?

### Review/Discuss (Collaborative Member Checking)

- Balance of expectations and what you believe children need to experience
  - Talk to each other about how you balance expectations placed on you by administration with how you feel children should learn.
- Please talk about the role of administrators/coaches/district initiatives on your day-to-day decision-making around implementing play into your classroom environment
- Talk to one another about how your typical day might look.
  - 1. In a review of lesson plans over a week's time, how would play be represented in those plans?
  - 2. In a typically daily lesson, how is play represented in your plans?
  - 3. Are play experiences you provide reflected in your lesson plans?

---

### Review/Discuss

- Outside perceptions
  - Talk to one another about outside perceptions (from administrators, other teachers, etc.) on play and how that influences your classroom decisions
- How is trust reflected in your classroom and your ability to make decisions?
  - In other words, do you feel trusted to provide children with what they need? Do you trust you have the support to make decisions about what children need.

### Review/Discuss

- Relationships with students
  - Could you describe to one another how you build relationships with students, and how those relationships are fostered?
    - How does play support the building of relationships?
  - Talk to one another about how relationships with students are affected by instructional decisions such as implementing mandates, following curricular guidelines, etc.
- Valuing childhood and the need to "let kids be kids"
  - Talk to one another about your thoughts on childhood, how children are growing up, and how your role as educators influence that, specifically in regards to implementing play-based learning.
- Kindergarten as a foundation for learning
  - Talk to one another about what foundational aspects of kindergarten you feel are important to nurture to prepare for future learning. How does play support these foundational aspects?

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### Additional Questions

How has working as a kindergarten teacher shaped your views of the current state of early childhood education and play-based learning?

What would you like to see changed in early childhood education in your school/district moving forward?

What do you wish administrators/district leaders knew about:

- Teaching kindergarten in the current educational climate?
- Play and play-based learning?

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## Appendix H: Code Charting Template

### Questionnaire Responses

Participant	Summary	Primary Codes

### Interviews

Participant	Summary	Primary Codes

### Focus Group

Participants	Summary	Primary Codes

### Appendix I: Coding Key Template

Code	Code Description	Example Quote of Code
		(Pseudonym/Source/Timestamp):
		(Pseudonym/Source/Timestamp):
		(Pseudonym/Source/Timestamp):
		(Pseudonym/Source/Timestamp):