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High Stakes Play: Early Childhood Special Educators' Perspectives of Play in Pre-Kindergarten Classrooms

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High Stakes Play: Early Childhood Special Educators' Perspectives

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by

Joanne Scandling Manwaring

DEDICATION

To Jack,

who has always known the value of play

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend my gratitude to my major professor Dr. Jones, for all of her support and the rest of my committee for their positive encouragement to complete the journey. A special thanks goes to Dr. Paul for convincing me to "trust the process". Of course, none of this would have been possible without the unwavering faith and patience of my family. Thank you to all who made this endeavor possible.

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ABSTRACT

This study examined Early Childhood Special Educators' perceptions of play as a developmentally appropriate practice in special education prekindergarten classrooms in one southeastern school district. Through purposeful sampling, eight prekindergarten special educators were identified because they held multiple teaching certifications and some held National Board certification. The participants had many years of experience in pre-kindergarten special education, and were professional development trainers, teacher mentors and or leaders in the prekindergarten special education community. These eight accomplished pre-kindergarten special education teachers were interviewed using an informal, semi-structured format about their beliefs concerning play, how they implement it in their classrooms as well as their perspectives on barriers to play. The participants identify the supports needed to implement play as a developmentally appropriate practice in special education prekindergarten classrooms. The findings reveal that Early Childhood Special Educators' believe in play as a developmentally appropriate practice and state that play is foundational to their practice in prekindergarten classrooms for children with special needs. Implications for future research and practice are included.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Play is an accepted developmentally appropriate practice that is embedded across the daily routine in an early childhood classroom (Bredekamp, 1997; Elkind, 1986; Schweinhart, 2008). Long acknowledged as "children's work," play is the centerpiece of early childhood education (Paley, 2004). A recent report, *Crisis in the Kindergarten*, documents the loss of play in kindergartens across the United States and discusses the repercussions of this loss and its effects on young kindergarten age children (Miller & Almon, 2009). Prompted by this report, this study examined Early Childhood Special Educators' perceptions of play as a developmentally appropriate practice in special education pre-kindergarten classrooms for children with special needs. If Early Childhood Educators and Early Childhood Special Educators embrace the philosophical and theoretical approach of adult supported/child-directed play-based learning, it is important to explore their beliefs about play. The present study attempted to capture the perceptions and concerns of Early Childhood Special Educators surrounding play as a developmentally appropriate practice.

This chapter identifies the problem, describes the conceptual framework and then presents the research questions. The problem is the apparent replacement of play as a developmentally appropriate practice by stringent academic demands that minimize the accepted value of play in prekindergarten classrooms (Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, & Gryfe, 2008). Through a constructivist's lens, the study presents a collection and analysis

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of individual Early Childhood Special Educator's perceptions of play in their classrooms. The research questions aim to capture Early Childhood Special Educators' beliefs about play in their classrooms in order to understand how their beliefs impact their practice. The questions also aim to contribute to the knowledge base of teacher beliefs about play, particularly those of Early Childhood Special Educators.

One of the most important goals of education is to help children become lifelong learners who are engaged and committed to learning and education as a means to a richer, more fulfilling life as an educated individual (Almon, 2004). Research has shown that play as an instructional practice improves outcomes for young children, increases social-emotional skills, academic skills and success (Bodrova &Leong, 2003; Bray & Cooper, 2007; Wohlwend, 2008). If play, as one of the foundations of developmentally appropriate practice for young children is disappearing, then all educators should be concerned about the future of education. The loss of play negatively impacts long term outcomes for children as well as impacts their interest in school and their self-confidence (Almon, 2004; Bergen, 2001; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1992; Wohlwend, 2008). The high academic demands currently demonstrated in kindergarten may be increasing the retention rates and the delay of school entry and may increase the number of children identified for special education services (Ashiabi, 2007; Erwin & Delair, 2004) The delay of school entry and the over identification of young children for special education services, combined with the move away from child-centered instruction toward standardization and direct instruction, should be of particular interest to Early Childhood Special Educators whose primary role is that of an early interventionist who hopes to ameliorate the effects of developmental delays and build on the individual child's

strengths to ensure future success in school (Gilliam, 2005; Hirsch-Pasek, 2009). In particular, the Early Childhood Special Educator's professional development which emphasizes early intervention and the use of evidence based practices has focused on meeting the needs of the individual child (Dunst, Trivette & Cutspec, 2002). The present emphasis on whole group direct instruction and prescriptive learning is contrary to the philosophy of both early childhood and special education (Bredekamp, 1997; Hoot, 1989).

This topic has particular significance for me because of my inherent belief that learning and the acquisition of knowledge is fun and playful, is intrinsically motivating, and allows each of us to become productive, caring and insightful social agents of our own futures. Play is an integral part of learning and cannot be separated nor compartmentalized, particularly for young learners. For me, play is intertwined with learning: the quest for new knowledge is equivalent to the exploration of a new toy on the playground. Play provides opportunities for choice, creativity, perspective taking, analysis, and problem solving. All of these lead to critical thinking skills, social understanding and lifelong learning. It is important to me as a teacher and teacher educator/researcher that all children enjoy learning and are supported to find ways to continually increase their knowledge through playful inquiry. It is even more important to me that schools simultaneously promote both learning and play to create informed, creative, thoughtful, socially responsive learners.

I came to doctoral study because I wanted to learn more about children, teachers, teaching and learning, and I thought it would be fun. Despite the simplicity of the statement, my reasoning is complex. My doctoral quest for more knowledge is a journey

to understand the individual philosophies of special education and early childhood education in order to solidify my own philosophy of education and to be a better teacher of young children and supporter of my professional peers. I acknowledge the hard work and dedication doctoral study requires, but I maintain that the play (fun) aspects of choice, creativity, perspective taking, analysis and problem solving are what sustain my work. In fact, I believe these aspects are vital to the creation of lifelong learners in our society, and I believe every child has a right to experience learning from a play perspective.

In conjunction with my pursuit of knowledge and playful fun, my motivation to pursue doctoral work stemmed from my perceptions of the tensions between research and practice. At work in classrooms and in conversations with teachers, the university and the world of theory and research sometimes appeared to be far removed from practice. From my teacher perspective, there was a disconnect between research and practice when I began my doctoral studies.

Throughout my studies, I have been both public school teacher and doctoral student. It was important for me to maintain both identities, professionally and personally. My pursuit of knowledge was personal and professional; I desired to learn for my own edification, but I also sought ways to improve my practice as a teacher mentor and professional development trainer. It was important for me to continue to work from within the public school system because of my strong belief in a free and appropriate public education for all children, but I recognized it would benefit from thoughtful reform. If I wanted to effect change, I felt I should be on the inside of the public education world. Critical theory provided me with the framework to understand insider

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and outsider perspectives, and the visible and invisible power of institutions such as public education (MacNaughton, 2005; Paul, 2005).

As I learn new ways of thinking and seeing, I evolve into another entity. My roles become more fluid and interchangeable. What I once felt was dichotomous; I now think is synchronous for me as a learner. I cannot separate myself into researcher and practitioner any longer. As theory becomes practice and practice becomes theory, I continue to share knowledge and to reflect with the Early Childhood Special Educators I support. While the synchronicity begins to frame my epistemology, a wedge sometimes appears to be driven between research and practice in the world of Early Childhood Special public education.

I am motivated by my own theories and experiences of early childhood special education practice as well as by my role as the pre-kindergarten exceptional education district resource teacher. I was a classroom prekindergarten special education teacher and now, as a resource teacher, I support teachers in the establishment of their learning environments and implementation of developmentally appropriate practice. In my role, I develop trainings that meet the criteria for "best practice" as identified by research and Early Childhood Education and Early Childhood Special Education's professional organizations.

These two professional organizations: The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) embody the philosophical framework of early childhood education. Two of their publications, *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs* (1997) and *DEC Recommended Practices* (2005) provide the

foundation for Early Childhood Education (ECE) and Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) practices. Both are the established expert entities in their respective fields of early childhood and early childhood special education. Their standards guide the instruction of preservice teachers as well as the professional development of in-service teachers (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Sandall, Hemmeter, Smith & Mclean, 2005).

Developmentally appropriate practices are based upon principles of child development and learning (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). These practices are defined as age appropriate, individualized and responsive to children (Wien, 1996). Play is one of the fundamental principles of developmentally appropriate practice, because it allows children to explore their world, interact with each other and adults, and develop symbolic representation and problem solve, all of which serve as the foundation for later school success. According to NAEYC, play is integral to both development and learning for young children (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997) Child-initiated/adult facilitated play opportunities are essential in the early childhood classroom. The DEC embraces NAEYC's position on developmentally appropriate practice with more emphasis on the individual strengths and needs of children with disabilities (Sandall et al., 2005).

There appears to be an incongruence between the espoused standards based on child development as set forth by the professional organizations and public school policies that require more standardized assessment, emphasize literacy and numeracy over other developmental domains and minimize opportunities for play that is child initiated and allows for creative problem solving, social interaction and language enhancement (Armstrong, 2007; Miller and Almon, 2009). Known as "push down academics," these demands are reflected in public policy, teacher perception, parent and

administrator attitudes and child behavior and school success or failure (Gill, Winters & Friedman, 2006). I believe this impacts how teachers perceive and use developmentally appropriate instructional practices in pre-kindergarten and other early childhood classrooms. Increasing incidences of problem behaviors and difficulty with curricula are being reported in the media as related to the loss of play and increasing academic demands on young children (Fabes, Martin, Hanish, Anders, Madden-Derdich, 2003:Schroeder, 2007; Wenner, 2009).

    This study was undertaken because of my dual roles of practitioner and teacher educator/researcher. Both roles afford opportunities for observations of play in early childhood classrooms in addition to discussions with Early Childhood Special Educators who teach in special education pre-kindergarten classrooms as well as preservice Early Childhood Education students who intern in pre-kindergarten, kindergarten or primary classrooms.

    Through observation in classrooms, I became aware of the increased amounts of teacher directed instruction and the subsequent decreased amounts of instructional time spent in child centered activities and play-based learning. In some classrooms, observations reveal a shift in the classroom environment as tables are the focal point and pencil and paper tasks are the primary instructional strategy. Instruction is teacher centered and teacher driven. Centers, the hallmark of the early childhood environment where play is child initiated and where children explore materials, take on pretend play roles, and interact with each other, are relegated to smaller and smaller areas within the classroom. Center Time, the primary vehicle of child directed activity and inquiry, is shorter and highly structured by the teacher. In conversations, inservice teachers and pre-

service teachers share anecdotal frustrations about the academic emphasis and their concern about the loss of play in their classrooms. The teachers describe the perceived academic pressures of kindergarten expectations, limited time to cover the curriculum and the fear that young children with disabilities will struggle in elementary school.

Schroeder, (2007) and Wenner (2009) confirm these pressures by stating that worries and fears over children's unpreparedness for kindergarten entry and other perceived inadequacies such as young developmental age in comparison to chronological age and or social immaturity, have impacted curricula, teachers' and parents' attitudes, instructional approaches and materials used in the preschool classroom. This dichotomy between theory and philosophy and actual practice became more evident as I continued to observe and converse with teachers. Subsequently, play as a developmentally appropriate instructional practice as espoused by Sandall and colleagues (2005) and the perceived barriers to play in practice became a central focus for my study.

From this dual perspective, I began to examine my own beliefs about play in the pre-kindergarten special education classroom which led to a review of the extant literature in preparation for the study. I also initiated a conversation in the form of online book studies between the teachers with whom I work. As a practitioner/researcher, I believe in dynamic research that evolves over time. As I increased my knowledge and understanding about play as a developmentally appropriate practice, I felt it was imperative to share professional literature with the teachers I support. Over two summers, a group of teachers voluntarily read and posted responses to *A Crisis in the Kindergarten (Miller & Almon, 2009)* and *Mandate for Playful Learning in Preschool (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Beck & Singer,2009).* The teachers' responses to the books began to reveal

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their beliefs/perceptions about play as a developmentally appropriate practice and the tensions they felt from perceived barriers to play in their classrooms. The book studies were facilitated by and between teachers. The book study postings could be accessed by all pre-k special teachers in the district through an online format. While I was not an active participant, their postings confirmed the need for an exploration of play as a developmentally appropriate practice.

<div align="center">Statement of the Problem</div>

The title, High Stakes Play, is meant to illustrate the importance of play in children's lives in pre-kindergarten classrooms and to contrast with the other widely used term that is so prevalent in education reform: High Stakes Testing. High Stakes Testing has become the foundation of education reform over the last decade (Gallagher, 2000; Paris & McEvoy, 2000; Thompson, 2001). What began as state-wide standardized testing to measure student competency in middle elementary and high school has now become an annual event for all school age children. Even in years when students are not assessed on the state-wide instrument, they are subjected to other standardized assessments and intense preparation for the main event.

High Stakes Testing has trickled down to the pre-kindergarten level where children are assessed as they leave preschool and enter kindergarten (Graue, 2009). Worries and fears over children's unpreparedness and perceived inadequacies for school readiness have impacted curricula, teachers' and parents' attitudes as well as instructional approaches and materials (Schroeder, 2007; Wenner, 2009). For children with developmental delays, the implications are even greater (Barton & Wolery, 2008; Hestenes & Carroll, 2000). If early childhood classrooms are becoming more focused on

standardized testing and direct instruction how will children with developmental delays succeed? Early childhood education has long theorized on the importance of child initiated and child directed practices to promote optimal learning with an emphasis on individualization (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Sandal et al., 2005). If standardization, direct instruction and prescriptive curricula become the norm in apparent contrast to the philosophy of the field, how will Early Childhood Special Educators teach young children with disabilities?

National policy now requires entry and exit standardized testing for all children receiving early intervention and special education services (IDEIA, 2004). Early Childhood Educators and Early Childhood Special Educators need to consider play as a developmentally appropriate practice that is central to the philosophies and developmental theories of Early Childhood Education. Play as an integral piece of developmentally appropriate practice has been the accepted foundation of learning for young children since the inception of Early Childhood Education as a field of its own (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). The emphasis on academic instruction based on rigid, standardized assessments is threatening play as the developmentally appropriate instructional strategy in pre-kindergarten classrooms. Behavior problems, retention rates, delayed school entry rates and increasing numbers of children being identified for special education are impacting children in pre-kindergarten programs (Gilliam, 2005). High Stakes Play should be part of the education reform continuum because play is vital to future school success and all children should be able to learn and play in order to become productive, socially interactive, lifelong learners.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to learn about Early Childhood Special Educators' beliefs/perceptions about play in their classrooms in light of the changes in curricular, assessment and performance expectations for all children entering kindergarten. Play and developmentally appropriate practices in pre-kindergartens have been the topic of many studies over the last three decades (Bray & Cooper, 2007; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Saracho & Spodek, ed., 1998). Few have focused on the play of children with special needs. When identified, the studies focused on examinations of children's play styles or skills and their use of toys rather than play as an instructional practice in the early childhood special education classroom (Barton & Wolery, 2008; Brodin, 1999; Cress, Arens & Zahucek, 2007; Hestenes & Carroll, 2000; Malone, 2009). While many studies about the beliefs of Early Childhood Educators were identified, limited studies about the beliefs/perceptions and practices of Early Childhood Special Educators' teaching in self-contained special education classrooms were identified in a search of the literature (Bredekamp, 1987; Dunn & Kontos, 1997; Elkind, 1986; McMullen & Alat, 2002; Miller & Almon, 2009 Schweinhart, 2008).

This reveals a gap in the knowledge and practice of Early Childhood Special Education. The study explored Early Childhood Special Educators' beliefs about play, what if, any, perceived barriers to play exist, and identified professional development needs that will support Early Childhood Special Educators to implement rich and meaningful play experiences in pre-kindergarten classrooms. It is hoped that this study

will contribute to the literature about teachers' beliefs about play in the early childhood special education classroom.

Conceptual Framework

As the idea for the study took shape through the literature search and in conversations with early childhood special educators, I began to think about how to frame the study and what I really wanted to learn from it. At first, I wanted to gain a general sense of what the teachers' beliefs about play were and thought that a superficial questionnaire would answer my questions and provide me with confirmation of my own beliefs and biases about play as well as identify ideas for training. As I read and observed more, I began to realize the complexity of the issues in terms of play, teacher decision making, visible and invisible barriers in the form of institutional hierarchy, as well as the tensions between theory and practice.

The chosen theoretical perspective of this study is that of a constructivist who uses narrative to learn about and understand the nature of reality through my own and others' individual stories (Lincoln in Paul, 2005). It was important to me to learn about the play perspectives of the teachers with whom I worked and supported. I wanted to know more about their perceptions of play in their classrooms and their students' development and what impact, if any, institutional, curricular and assessment demands are having on their daily instructional practice. I also wanted to know more about the educational planning for their students transitioning to kindergarten within the context of play. As I become increasingly comfortable with the links between theory and practice and feel confident to embrace developmentally appropriate practices in the education of

young children with disabilities, I wanted to know what Early Childhood Special Educators' beliefs were, if there were barriers to their beliefs and if they were able to implement their beliefs in their classrooms.

Within the philosophical perspective of Constructivism, reality is defined as being constructed by the individual in the interaction between the mind (self) and the physical world (Paul, 2005). Constructivism is interpretive in nature in that it focuses on meaning-making activities of thinking people (Lincoln in Paul, 2005). The researcher seeks to understand participants of a study within a particular context in order to gain a deep understanding or verstehen of how the individual makes meaning in his/her life (Lincoln in Paul, 2005). Proponents of this perspective believe that values are infused and ever present throughout inquiry and the researcher must be mindful and respectful of the beliefs and values of individuals (Paul, 2005).

I recognized that I must be aware of the values and beliefs I bring to the inquiry. My beliefs about play, developmentally appropriate practice and special education influence the study. Play is the chosen topic because I believe it is important and I value it as an inherent right for all children in the pursuit of learning and lifelong happiness. Constructivism also has an underlying goal of enhancing social justice and promoting social change (Lincoln in Paul, 2005). Through this study, I am cognizant now of the apparent loss of play and the detrimental impact this loss could have on young children with disabilities. I think it is important to capture the Early Childhood Special Educators' stories who teach in prekindergarten classrooms. I hope to give voice to their beliefs and perspectives about play.

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This constructivist perspective is well suited to a study of the perceptions of play that teachers of young children with special needs embody and enact. As teachers, they create learning experiences that are the foundation for the children's construction of their own individual educational and social realities. The play experiences they provide in the classroom are integral to the child's development as an individual. Through the exploration of their perspectives of the role and implementation of play, barriers that may exist, and the support they perceive they may need, will be illuminated.

Through the analysis of the stated perspectives and practices of these expert Early Childhood Special Educators, policy makers, administrators and practitioners will be informed about how play as an accepted "best practice" is implemented in American classrooms today. The analysis will also identify how Early Childhood Special Educators' beliefs impact their practice across the daily routine in prekindergarten classrooms (Ashiabi, 2007; Erwin & Delair, 2004; File, 1994; Logue & Harvey, 2009).

Rationale

This study addressed the gap in the knowledge in the field of Early Childhood Education through the examination of Early Childhood Special Educators' perceptions about play as developmentally appropriate practice in self-contained pre-kindergarten classrooms. The decline in play in general Early Childhood kindergarten and pre-kindergarten classrooms as well as Early Childhood Educators' beliefs about developmentally appropriate practices is well documented in the literature (Miller & Almon, 2009; Ashiabi, 2007; Erwin & Delair, 2004).

Knowledge about Early Childhood Special Educators' beliefs about play pertaining to young children with special needs is lacking. If play is integral to typical

development in young children, it is even more important to children with developmental delays who need every opportunity to succeed and become independent, lifelong learners (Barton & Wolery, 2008; Hestenes & Carroll, 2000). If teachers' perceptions and beliefs impact their practice (Ashiabi, 2007; Erwin and Delair, 2004), it is imperative to know if and how Early Childhood Special Educators' beliefs about play as a developmentally appropriate practice are implemented in their pre-kindergarten classrooms.

Early Childhood Special Educators work in public schools, teaching the youngest children (age three to five) in an elementary school. Their classes are composed of children identified with developmental disabilities that range from mild to severe (IDEA, 2004). Special education services on public school campuses are provided to preschool age children as part of the federal mandate of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). Preschool is not available universally in public schools to typically developing children so there may not be any other preschool age children on campus. If there are any other preschool age children, they are in different classrooms and may be across the campus from the class of young children with disabilities.

The Early Childhood Special Educators may work in isolation from "professional partners" who share the same philosophical and theoretical approach to the education of young children. Their classes may look fundamentally different from elementary level classes because of Early Childhood Education's theoretical foundations and developmentally appropriate instructional practices. The Early Childhood classroom is child centered; children make choices through activities and materials provided by the teacher. Activities are done in small groups or by individuals (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Wien, 1996). Early Childhood Special Educators teach a significant portion of

America's preschool children. They appear to have gone unnoticed in the research regarding teachers' beliefs about play in the classroom. It is important to learn about their beliefs/perspectives about play in their classrooms in order to be assured that our youngest students in school are afforded the most appropriate instructional strategies and opportunities to learn.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study.

1. What are Early Childhood Special Educators beliefs/perspectives on play as a developmentally appropriate practice in their classrooms and what factors influence those beliefs?

2. In what ways is play implemented in the classroom?

3. What do Early Childhood Special Educators believe about the role of the adult in play?

4. What, if any, are the barriers to play as a developmentally appropriate practice in Early Childhood Special Education classrooms?

5. What supports would enable Early Childhood Special Educators to implement play more fully as a developmentally appropriate practice?

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following terms are defined.

Early Childhood Exceptional/Special Educator

This is a teacher of three, four and five year old children who have been identified with a

disability or developmental delay(s).

Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP)

Developmentally Appropriate Practice is defined as instructional practice that is

grounded in research which promotes and nurtures the optimal educational development

of young children as defined by NAEYC.

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Division of Early Childhood of the Council of Exceptional Children (DEC of CEC)

DEC is the professional organization of Early Childhood Exceptional Educators.

National Board Certification from the National Board of Professional Teaching

Standards (NBPTS)

This is an advanced teacher certification which is designed to improve teacher and

student learning. Teachers engage in a year long, voluntary ten part process that focuses

on teaching practices and assessment of content knowledge. Teachers who meet the

criteria as judged by expert teachers are acknowledged as effective and accomplished.

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)

NAEYC is the professional organization of Early Childhood and Early Childhood

Special/Exceptional Educators.

Push-down academics

Push-down academics occurs when the curricular expectations of older grade levels are

brought down to younger children.

Developmental Delays/Disabilities/Special Needs

These terms are used interchangeably as descriptors of the children in self-contained special education classrooms. The children may have a diagnosed disability, or established developmental delays as identified through an evaluative process that qualifies the children for special education services.

Organization of the Study

The remaining chapters are organized in the following way: Chapter Two is a review of relevant literature. The literature examines the nature of play in child development, play and children with special needs, play in preschool classrooms, as well as studies concerning teacher beliefs and perspectives about play. Chapter Three provides information about the research design, the participants, the interview process as the data collection instrument and the data analysis procedures. The ethics and informed consent are also discussed. Chapter Four reveals the findings of the study. Chapter Five discusses the findings, cites the limitations of the study and presents implications for further research and professional development for both pre-service and in-service teachers.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Literature

The literature review first examines the nature of play in child development as defined by the American Academy of Pediatrics, child development theorists Vygotsky and Piaget and educational theorists Parten and Smilansky, as well as others for typically developing children and then children with disabilities. Research about play in the preschool classroom with typical children and children with disabilities is included in the review to gather a sense of the field of play research and to identify trends and issues that affect play. The review includes a discussion of the loss of play in children's lives. Teacher cognition research and studies examining teachers' beliefs/perceptions about developmentally appropriate practices are discussed.

Play Defined

In 2007, Kenneth Ginsburg and a committee of the American Academy of Pediatrics published a paper defining play which stressed its importance in the lives of young children and their relationships with their families. The paper was written as a position statement on play as well as a response to the perceived disappearance of play in children's lives. The authors contended that play is essential to a child's cognitive, social-emotional and physical development (Ginsburg, 2007). Play has been acknowledged as a right for all children by the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights (Ginsburg, 2007). The authors believed that children's right to play is being challenged by societal pressures. They stated that these pressures negatively affect children's optimal

growth and development (Ginsburg, 2007). Concern over these pressures began as long ago as 1961, when the International Play Association was formed to protect children's right to play (Wenner, 2009).

The authors defined play as the child's interaction and engagement with the world around him. Play promotes healthy brain development, allows children opportunities to be creative and imaginative, to take on social roles and to develop new competencies which prepare them for their futures. Play strengthens skills in all developmental areas, builds confidence and resiliency, allows children to practice leadership and collaborative roles. Child directed play allows a child to explore his own interests in order to develop a sense of self, and provides opportunities for problem solving and sharing. Children also benefit from adult supported play which helps to expand their play skills. Play also helps to form and enhance relationships, first between family members and then with friends and others in children's lives (Ginsburg, 2007).

The child development theorist, Lev Vygotsky, stated that play is "the leading source of development in preschool years" (Vygotsky, 2002, p.1). He theorized that play is the activity in which the most important developmental changes are made. According to Vygotsky, play is crucial and integral to developmental growth because it helps to prepare the child for the next developmental activity: school (Duncan & Tarulli, 2003).

Vygotsky claimed that children need to experience play that attracts their interests, motivates them and provides them with incentives. He stated that these play experiences propel children through each stage of development. Vygotsky said that play is purposeful in that the child learns to be aware of his/her own actions and that every object in the environment has meaning, which is the beginning of abstract thought for

young children (Vygotsky, 2002). Through play, creativity and imagination begin to emerge. Play builds cognitive skills of symbolic representation which help form abstract thought which evolves into symbolism, a precursor of literacy (Duncan & Tarulli, 2003). Through play, children move from the concrete activity of object play to pretend play to game play (Duncan and Tarulli, 2003). Their development evolves from social activities to cognitively abstract activities. Play is imaginative and spontaneous but also rule bound. It is a learning activity because it requires children to learn and to understand the rules in order to be involved in the play activity (Nicolopoulou, Barbosa de Sa, Ilgaz & Brockmeyer, 2010).

Play provides children the opportunities to practice social roles and self regulation. This helps them to begin to understand the social system of their culture (Nicolopoulou et al., 2010). It allows children to learn about other's perspectives and differences as well as to develop shared understandings. Play helps them to prepare for being a part of the societal structure and ultimately to be a contributing member of the society (Duncan & Tarulli, 2003).

Jean Piaget (1962), another leading theorist of child development, defined play within the following stages of cognitive development. The first stage is sensorimotor in which the very youngest children (infants and toddlers) use their bodies (their senses) to interact with objects and people in their environment. The next stage, symbolic play, occurs around ages three or four when children begin to use objects interchangeably and interact with their peers. The final stage, games, is the most structured with rules and specified goals. Children reach the final stage around the age of five to seven.

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In a review of the literature on play since 1983, Goncu, Patt & Kuba (2002) define play as a pleasurable activity in which participants attach meaning to objects and activities. These authors examined play from the foundational work of Parten (1932) and Smilansky (1968). Parten was one of the first to study and define play in young children. She used the term social participation and divided it into categories which include: solitary play, parallel play, associative play and cooperative play which appear in a developmental sequence as the child matures. Solitary play is defined as independent play in which the child plays by him/her self. In parallel play, the child plays near others and enjoys their proximity but does not engage in their activities or interact with them.

During associative play, children may play together and exchange materials but there is not a clear or planned purpose to the play. The final stage, cooperative, is play in which the child plays purposefully with others and may take on various roles. Later, Smilansky defined categories of cognitive play in her seminal study of young Israeli children (Smilansky, 1968). Her categories include: functional, constructive and dramatic or pretend. Smilansky's categories are similar to Parten's but she expands on dramatic play, naming it sociodramatic. She describes it as the play in which a child interacts in the environment but the distinction here is that the interaction is with people as opposed to just objects or materials (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). Both Parten and Smilansky contend that young children spend a substantial portion of their time engaged in dramatic and sociodramatic play which strengthens their social and cognitive skills (Parten, 1932; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990).

Bergen (2001) states that for children, receptive and expressive language, pretend play and symbolic representation occur about the same time in development. She

suggests that "pretend play requires the ability to transform objects and actions

symbolically; it is carried out through interactive social dialogue and negotiation: and it

involves role taking, script knowledge, and improvisation" (p.1).

Play has also been defined as pleasurable and purposeful engagement in

responsive, developmentally appropriate, teacher scaffolded activities and where and how

children discover truths about themselves and others through experiences and their

outcomes (Dyson, 2009; Winsler, 2003). Author and kindergarten teacher, Vivian Paley,

states that play "represents inspiration, interpretation, and integration of all other ideas

and activities" (Paley in Grace, p. 37). Paley also maintains that play is the work of

children (Paley, 2005).

For Joan Almon, an educator for over 30 years and one of the founders for

Alliance for Childhood defines play as "the bubbling spring of health and creativity

within each child—and for that matter, within every human being" in her article, *The

Vital Role of Play in Childhood* (Almon, p.1). Like Paley, Almon contends that children

do not make a distinction between work and play. For children, the two are intertwined as

they engage in the process of development (Almon, 2004). Almon (2004) believes that

children's natural exuberance toward the world around them enhances a lifelong love of

learning through play.

The 2009 National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)

position paper names play as one of the twelve main considerations of developmentally

appropriate practice (NAEYC Position Statement, 2009). NAEYC contends that play "is

an important vehicle for developing self-regulation as well as for promoting language,

cognition, and social competence" (p.14). Included in their description of the benefits of

play to the general development and well-being of young children is the acknowledgement that play appears to be declining in the United States. Like the Academy of Pediatrics, NAEYC warns of the societal pressures that affect children's opportunities to engage in free play.

New brain research in both animals and humans reports on the importance of play in mental health and social skills acquisition (Wenner, 2009). Researchers have found that children and animals that do not play grow into individuals that are more stressed and have trouble dealing with difficult situations (Wenner, 2009). Play deprivation can lead to increased anxiety and poorly developed social and cognitive skills. Free play opportunities allow children to work through anxieties and stresses and promote emotional health (Wenner, 2009). Wohlwend (2008) examines play from a literacy acquisition perspective. She suggests that children use play to practice social interactions, explore media and materials through verbal and non-verbal means and to build peer relationships.

Westby (1988) discussed the role of play in social competency and the relationship between the onset of play and the onset of language. She maintained that play requires good communication skills but that it is also facilitated by them.

In *The Creative Curriculum for Preschool,* a research based curriculum created specifically for preschoolers, the authors state that dramatic play enhances all developmental domains and is vital to children's development (Dodge, Colker & Heroman, 2002). They contend that social skills are built when children take on alternative roles and negotiate situations. Children learn empathy for each other pretending to be other people, learn to interact with peers and to regulate their impulses.

Physically, children increase gross motor and fine motor function engaging in a variety of play activities and tasks. Cognitively, children create mental representations in their minds as they imagine situations and experience interactions. They learn to problem solve as they encounter novel situations. Language skills increase as children converse with each other, enhancing both their receptive and expressive skills as they play (Dodge, Colker & Heroman, 2002).

In his investigation of the literature on pretend play, Kavanaugh (in Spodek & Saracho, 2006) discusses the role of play in adult development. In agreement with other researchers, he suggests that play becomes the adult appreciation of art and literature. This assertion that play bears a role in adult development is worth exploring in future research.

In summary, play is a complex concept that is integral to the development of children. Play promotes learning across all developmental domains: cognitive, communication, social-emotional, physical, and adaptive. Through play, children build language skills, imitate adult roles as practice for the future, manipulate objects and materials, problem solve and use their imaginations to create fantasies that help them make sense of their world.

<center>Play and Children with Disabilities</center>

Vygotsky believed that children with developmental disabilities follow the same developmental trajectory as typically developing children, but he states that play is delayed in children with disabilities (Vygotsky, 2002). Children with developmental disabilities may have limited language skills or be non-verbal, may have motor delays, may not yet imitate actions of adults or children and may not yet have the cognitive

ability to form mental representations to play in order to engage and interact in their environment. Children with disabilities may need more supports to play and interact in their environment (Greenspan, 1990).

Children with disabilities may have difficulty initiating and sustaining play. The degree of impairment and their own range of interests may impede their ability to play and interact with others as well understand the perspective of others (Mastrangelo, 2009). The play patterns of children with disabilities have revealed that they engage in less cooperative play and more solitary play than their typical peers (Hestenes & Carroll, 2000).

Westby (1988) discusses the development of play in young children with developmental delays. She notes that children with developmental delays "are less likely to initiate play …more frequently engage in isolated and toy-directed behaviors and less in social-interactive play" (Westby, p. 2). Westby states that children with delays need concrete toys for representation, play with a smaller variety of toys and display a wider variability of skills than typically developing children.

The Division of Early Childhood (DEC) of the Council of Exceptional Children (CEC) includes play in their list of developmentally appropriate practices (Sandall, Hemmeter, Smith & McLean, 2005). The DEC is the professional organization for Early Childhood Special Educators. Its recommended practices are the foundation of Early Intervention and Early Childhood Special Education. The goal of Early Intervention and Early Childhood Special Education is to support the development of children with disabilities and optimize their strengths and skills through learning and experience (Sandall et al., 2005).

Play is discussed as an essential child-focused practice which is structured to promote engagement and interaction, is geared to a child's interests, and promotes friendship and communication (Sandall et al., 2005). Children's play is facilitated by their peers and adults through modeling, imitation, and toy or materials exploration. In object play, adults may use children's interest in favorite toys to encourage joint attention, a precursor to building relationships and more advanced forms of play (Greenspan, 1990; Sandall, et al., 2005). Adults may structure play routines to enhance pretend play and support children to understand other perspectives.

Though they may require support, play is integral to the development of children with disabilities. Like typically developing children, they benefit from opportunities to interact and engage in their environment through play (Mastrangelo, 2009). Play activities can be used to embed learning opportunities and to enhance other developmental skills (Barton &Wolery, 2008).

<div align="center">Play in the Preschool Classroom</div>

After the search for definitions of play, it was important to me to learn about research that examines play in the preschool classroom. I was interested in learning what aspects of play have been or are being studied and where my study fits in the literature. I was curious to know if empirical evidence exists that links play in the classroom to learning and achievement. Many studies were identified throughout the 20th century that examine different aspects of play in the preschool classroom and confirm the importance of it as a developmentally appropriate practice that promotes lifelong learning (Parten, 1932; Ruben, Watson & Jambor, 1978; Smilansky and Shefatya, 1990). In particular, I hoped to find studies that examined play in prekindergarten special education classrooms.

Though some studies in inclusive classrooms were identified, there appears to be a paucity of research on the practice of play of children with disabilities in prekindergarten special education classrooms.

For the purposes of this study, I have synthesized the literature on play in the preschool classroom under three broad concepts: hierarchy of play skills, the teacher's role and play and peer interactions/social competence links to pre-academic skills. This section concludes with a table of the concepts.

Hierarchy of Play Skills

Smilansky (1968) conducted a study of play in Israeli children and later replicated it with American children. Smilansky identified important distinctions in the play of children from various socio-economic backgrounds and how those distinctions impact learning. Rubin, Maioni, & Hornung (1976) combined Parten's social play categories with Smilansky's cognitive play categories to study the play of "lower-class" and "middle-class" preschoolers. This study confirmed the socio-economic differences that Smilansky had found and suggested using both Parten and Smilansky to learn more about preschoolers' play behaviors.

Teacher's Role

The search revealed minimal research on teachers' role in play in the classroom. Ashiabi (2007) states that emotional regulation can be taught through the facilitation of play and children teach each other social skills through interaction, practice and recognition of their own emotions of those of their peers. In a study examining teacher-child play interactions, Trawick-Smith and Dziurgot (2010) found that teachers with more education and experience were more likely to engage the children in high quality

play and that teachers need strong cognitive skills learned through their own education and experience to support play in the preschool classroom.

Barton and Wolery (2008) identified sixteen studies that examined teaching pretend play to children with disabilities but most of the teaching was not done by the classroom teacher so there was limited information found about the role of the teacher in play. In a recent study, classroom teachers were taught to teach pretend play to children with disabilities. The findings reveal that pretend play can be taught to children with disabilities by educated and experienced classroom teachers when systematically implemented with fidelity (Barton & Wolery, 2010).

Play and Peer Interaction/Social Competence and Links to Pre-Academic Skills

Many studies that examined play and links to pre-readiness skills were identified in the literature. Provost and LaFreniere (1991) and Coolahan, Fantuzzo, Mendez & McDermott (2000) found that play skills are linked to independence, social competence, and positive peer interaction and increased engagement in learning activities which further strengthens the value of play in preschool classrooms.

Play has been linked to enhanced literacy skills and symbolic thinking skills as well as increased math and language skills when paired with particular materials in the classroom (Hanline, Milton & Phelps, 2008; Heisner, 2005: Kaugars & Russ, 2009). Through the use of Vygotskian strategies to enhance play, teachers have fostered the development of self-regulation and cognitive skills that improved memory (Bodrova & Leong, 2005).

Children's social participation is enhanced and learning engagement is increased in child-directed play activities (Tsao, Odom, Buysse, Skinner, West & Vitztum-Komanecki 2008). This suggests that the balance between adult-directed and child-directed activities as recommended by NAEYC confirms the validity of social play and child-directed activities as best practices. Children with disabilities' play skills improved when they were paired with typically developing children who had higher play skills and were more likely to engage in pretend play in the general education setting (Bray & Cooper, 2007).

Table 1: Play in the Preschool Classroom: Synthesis of Concepts

Concept	Author(s)	Title	Findings
Hierarchy of Play Skills	Parten (1932)	"Social Participation among Preschool Children"	Defined levels of social play
	Rubin, Maioni & Hornung (1976) Rubin, Watson & Jambor (1978)	"Free-play Behaviors in Middle and Lower Class Preschoolers: Parten and Piaget revisited" "Free-play Behavior in Preschool and Kindergarten Children"	Confirmed Parten and Smilansky's hierarchy of play
	Smilansky (1968)	"The Effects of Socio-dramatic Play on Disadvantaged preschool Children"	Identified distinctions in play/Defined cognitive categories of play
Teacher's Role	Ashiabi (2005)	"Play in the Preschool Classroom: Its Socioemotional Significance and the Teacher's Role in Play"	Emotional regulation taught through facilitation of play
	Trawick-Smith & Dziurgot(2010)	"Untangling Teacher-Child Interactions: Do teacher education and experience influence "good-fit" responses to children's play?"	More teacher education and experience results in higher quality play facilitation
	Barton & Wolery (2008)	"Teaching Pretend Play to Children with Disabilities: A review of the literature"	Play in majority of 16 studies not taught/facilitated by teacher
		"Training Teachers to Promote Pretend Play in Young Children with	Implemented with fidelity, teachers can

	Barton & Wolery (2010)	Disabilities"	teach pretend play skills
Play and Peer Interactions/Social Competence links to pre-academic skills	Bray & Cooper (2007)	"The Play of Children with Special Needs in Mainstream and Special Education Settings"	Children with disabilities' skills improve when paired with typically developing children and when in the mainstream
	Bodrova & Leong (2005)	"Uniquely Preschool"	Using Vygotskian strategies, teachers can enhance play to foster self-regulation and cognitive skills
	Coolahan, Fantuzzo, Mendez & McDermott (2000)	"Preschool Peer Interactions"	Positive correlation between peer play and engagement in learning activities
	Hanline, Milton & Phelps (2008)	"A Longitudinal Study Exploring the Relationship of Representational Levels of Three Aspects of Preschool Sociodramatic Play and Early Academic Skills"	Sociodramatic play enhances literacy skills and helps to build symbolic thinking skills
	Heisner (2005)	"Telling Stories with Blocks: Encouraging language in the block center"	Block play builds math and language skills
	Kaugars & Russ (2009)	"Assessing Preschool Children's Pretend Play: Preliminary validation of the affect in play scale-preschool version"	Pretend play offers opportunities for exploration and examination of objects; enhances symbolic thinking; perspective taking
			Children more engaged in child-directed activities
	Tsao, Odom, Buysse, Skinner, West & Vitztum-Komanecki (2008)	"Social Participation for children with disabilities in inclusive preschool programs: Program typology and ecological features"	

The Loss of Play

The literature confirms that play in the classroom is vital to children's growth and development and is linked to academic and social success. Play is important but its existence as a developmentally appropriate practice in preschool classrooms is at risk. First known as "hothousing" in the 1980's, there has been a growing trend away from play as a developmentally appropriate practice (Gallagher and Coche, 1987). The authors note a change in preschool curricula that emphasizes more academics as parents have become more achievement oriented. Despite the literature that supports learning through play, children began to be taught complex cognitive skills that were beyond their cognitive level. Believers in 'hothousing' think that all children can learn anything when it is appropriately structured and arranged in the environment with corresponding materials (Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff & Gryfe, 2008). In 1995, The National Center for Education Statistics reported that the majority of parents of preschoolers thought that practice of academic skills was most important for kindergarten readiness (Ashiabi, 2005). There has been increasing emphasis on structured, academic learning through direct instruction for preschool children (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Eyer, 2003; Zigler, Singer, Bishop-Josef, 2004; Fisher et al., 2008). Almon (2004) notes the loss of playgrounds and physical education opportunities in public schools as well as the increase in adult structured activities for children. She states that children's lives are so structured they do not have the opportunity to play in order to build their own creativity and imagination. Because play and learning are so intertwined, children lose out on learning when they are not afforded opportunities to play.

Miller and Almon (2009) in their report *Crisis in the Kindergarten,* document the loss of play in kindergartens across America. They discuss how push down academics has reached the kindergarten in the form of more teacher directed, worksheet activities that focus on literacy and numeracy to the exclusion of other areas of child development. Graue (2009) describes kindergartens that spend long periods of the day on test preparation with little opportunity for creative play.

This shift in practice has significant implications for Early Childhood Special Educators. If typically developing children are being taught through developmentally inappropriate practices for which they are not developmentally ready, what is the impact on children with developmental delays? As the literature revealed these changes, it became even more important to learn about Early Childhood Special Educators' beliefs about play and how their beliefs impact play in the prekindergarten classroom.

Teacher Cognition and Beliefs Research

This section of the review focuses on teacher cognition and beliefs research. I wanted to find out what, if any, studies address Early Childhood Special Educators' beliefs about play and children with disabilities and play in the preschool classroom. It was important to me to learn about teachers' personal views and beliefs and to learn if they share beliefs and in what ways they enacted their beliefs about play in the classroom. I hoped to identify factors of consensus and dissonance in teachers' beliefs about play as a developmentally appropriate practice in the classroom.

The search was expanded to include teacher beliefs about developmentally appropriate practice with play as an embedded practice because of the limited number of

studies that directly examined Early Childhood Special Educator's beliefs about play. The section includes research about the factors that influence teacher beliefs and practices as well as research that identify differences in the beliefs of kindergarten and preschool teachers.

Teacher cognition research examines teachers' perceptions and attitudes about aspects of education and how these perceptions and attitudes affect individual teaching practices. K. E. Smith states "teacher cognition researchers assume that beliefs are powerful cognitive constructs through which teachers filter meanings about teaching and learning and because of which teachers take certain actions in the classroom" (Smith, K. 1997 in Genishi et al, 1998). Through surveys and interviews, researchers identify beliefs and perceptions and how they influence teacher practice.

Some of the factors that influence teacher philosophical beliefs were examined by McMullen and Alat (2002) in a review of the extant literature. These factors include overall level of education and type of coursework. In their study, they examined the relationship between preschool teachers' philosophy and their educational background and the implementation of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP). Factor analysis revealed that the level of education, rather than the type of education, was the key factor in the self-reported implementation of developmentally appropriate practice. These results of this study are significant for the present study because they indicate that teachers with at least a four year degree more readily adopt DAP even if their educational orientation is not Early Childhood Education. Early Childhood education coursework was another factor reported to influence teacher beliefs (Logue & Harvey, 2010). This has implications for pre-service teacher education as well as the profession.

Another study explored the relationship between teachers' self-reported beliefs and actual practices. McMullen, Elicker, Goetze, Huang, Lee, Mathers, Wen & Yang (2006) used observation and document analysis techniques to see if the teachers' practices aligned with their beliefs. Their findings state that teachers who taught using developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) as evidenced in "child-directed choice/play time, and emergent literacy and language development activities" held DAP beliefs (p. 87). Teachers, who espoused a more traditional direct instruction approach, implemented more direct instructional practices in their classrooms.

In a study comparing United States teachers' beliefs to South Korean teachers' beliefs, Kim (2005) examined the psychometric properties of the instrument, *Teachers' Beliefs and Instructional Practices Scale*. Results showed that factors influencing U.S. teachers' beliefs were "locus of control, educational level, personal teaching efficacy, and an ECE (Early Childhood Education) background and class size" (Kim, p.84). This study is important because of the inclusion of the locus of control factor and the personal teaching efficacy factor. Both of these may be significant factors to consider with the participants in the present study.

Curriculum trends were cited as another factor that influenced Early Childhood Special Educators' beliefs about developmentally appropriate practice. The teachers in one study identified push down academics as impacting their beliefs about practice and identified a disconnect between theory and practice that stressed an emphasis on academic learning over more developmentally appropriate practices (Giovacco-Johnson, Lava & Recchia, 2004). Institutional limitations such as standardized testing, over emphasis on literacy and numeracy and administrative pressure were identified as factors

that influence teachers' beliefs and impacts developmentally appropriate or inappropriate practice (Adcock & Patton, 2001; Lara-Cinisomo, Fuligni, Daugherty, Howes & Karoly, 2009).

Another factor identified was the belief that the provision of fun activities is the primary function of preschool and that children could learn anything through their interaction with the environment (Lee, 2006). These teachers in this study claimed that their practice reflected their beliefs and that preschool children should be afforded the opportunity to play and learn in their own ways. This was a very small study (18 volunteer participants) that may not be generalizable but it is important to acknowledge because of the current academic emphasis trend in preschool.

Teacher beliefs about children with disabilities were examined in a study measuring play and teacher child interactions (File, 1994). The findings reveal that teachers believed that children with disabilities had delayed social skills but spent more time supporting cognitive play. This has implications for practice and the teacher role of facilitated play to promote all aspects of development.

<center>Differences in Teacher Beliefs</center>

Research on beliefs of educators reveals that pre-kindergarten and kindergarten teachers may have different beliefs about the role of play and school readiness (Cinisomo, Fuligni, Ritchie, Howes & Karoly, 2008). There may be differences in beliefs among types of pre-kindergarten programs, early childhood educators and early childhood special educators. It is important to learn about the differences in the beliefs among these educators and to know how the differences may impact both teacher education and instructional practice.

Studies of kindergarten teachers' views were examined to better understand their beliefs about play and developmentally appropriate practices. Lin, Lawrence & Gorrell (2003) found that younger teachers thought academics in kindergarten were more important which may have implications for teacher education. They also discovered a regional difference. Kindergarten teachers in the south expected higher academic skills upon entry. Vaughn, Reiss, Rothlein and Hughes (1999) conducted a study of kindergarten teachers discussing the desirability and feasibility of teaching children with disabilities in their classrooms. The findings state that the teachers report not feeling prepared to teach children with disabilities but do express a willingness to try. Again, these findings may influence the beliefs of special educators whose children are transitioning into kindergarten with or without supports and may have implications for teacher education programs.

Chapter Summary

The review of the literature reveals a great deal of research on child development and play. Child development theorists, and more recently the Academy of Pediatrics, have emphasized the importance of play in children's lives. Researchers have focused on the benefits of play and how it supports development and prepares children for school. Over the last three decades a number of studies have examined the importance of play in pre-kindergarten classrooms and the resulting cognitive, social-emotional and physical benefits children receive from engagement in play. A few studies have focused on the teacher role in play in the classroom. Researchers have also begun to examine the loss of play and the effect it has on children's lives.

Some studies have investigated Early Childhood Educators' beliefs about play and developmentally appropriate practice. Despite the research and compelling evidence in classrooms for typically developing children, there appears to be a paucity of research about Early Childhood Special Educators' beliefs and practices about play and developmentally appropriate practice. If play is as important as the Early Childhood developmental and educational theorists contend, then it is imperative that studies examine Early Childhood Special Educators' beliefs about the role and practice of play for children with special needs.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

This chapter discusses the research design, the pilot process, the instrument, the participants, as well as the data collection and analysis. The ethics of the study are also explored.

As a researcher, it was important to me to choose a research design that fit with my epistemology about teaching and learning and one which matched how I perform my dual roles of practitioner and researcher. For me, teaching and learning are about relationships and interaction and deeply caring about the individuals with whom I work and teach. Teaching and learning are listening and collaborating for individual and mutual purposes for the promotion and perpetuation of knowledge (Postman & Weingartner, 1969). Teaching and learning are about understanding multiple perspectives and sharing knowledge through caring, supportive relationships which allows individuals to become productive citizens and lifelong learners however those individuals may define themselves (Ayers, 1993 ; Noddings, 1997) .

From this foundational point of view, I chose a qualitative design that would allow for a relationship between the researcher and the participant characterized by honesty, openness, respect and a shared passion for teaching young children with developmental delays. I think it is important to converse with teachers about their beliefs and perspectives. If teachers' practices are influenced through their beliefs, the exploration of those beliefs will help to illuminate teachers' instructional approaches to

teaching and learning in their classrooms (Smith (1997) in Genishi et al, 1998).Through the research, I wanted to engage Early Childhood Special Educators in discussions that would allow them to talk openly about their passions and their frustrations within the context of play in the classroom.

Through the research process, connections were made between researcher and teacher that promoted deep, rich conversations and reflections about play and its role in the individual teacher's professional practice. This qualitative approach formed the foundation for my research design and provided opportunities to engage in meaningful and thoughtful discussions. I wanted to have conversations with experienced Early Childhood Special Educators, many of whom are National Board Certified teachers and who, by my knowledge of them as professionals, willingly and regularly examine their own practice to construct optimal learning experiences for young children with developmental delays.

Careful thought was given to what the research design should be to understand the play beliefs/perspectives of Early Childhood Special Educators. The idea for the study grew out of a single report, *Crisis in the Kindergarten* (Miller & Almon, 2009). After reading the report, I began to have conversations with teachers and to observe more closely how play was enacted in classrooms. I read about play and thought about teachers' lives in the classroom and their beliefs about play. As I read and examined theories and studies about play, I wondered about the level of knowledge and understanding of play Early Childhood Special Educators have, their experiences with the implementation of play as a developmentally appropriate practice and how their beliefs

impacted how they teach young children with disabilities. From my reading and my experiences, the following research questions emerged.

Research Questions

1. What are Early Childhood Special Educators beliefs/perspectives of play as a developmentally appropriate practice in their classrooms and what factors influence their beliefs?

2. In what ways is play implemented in the classroom?

3. What do Early Childhood Special Educators believe about the role of the adult in play?

4. What, if any, are the barriers to play as a developmentally appropriate practice in Early Childhood Special Education classrooms?

5. What supports would enable Early Childhood Special Educators to implement play more fully as a developmentally appropriate practice?

Research Design

In order to answer the research questions, a qualitative approach was chosen that involved the use of a semi-structured interview process from a constructivist's point of view because it fit with the stated purpose (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2003). I hoped to understand Early Childhood Special Educators' beliefs about play through the collection and analysis of their stories. I wanted to give voice to their beliefs about play because these educators are often the first teachers of young children with developmental delays in a public school setting. It is important to attempt to understand what they believe and implement in their classrooms within the context of their own values, beliefs and

practices about play because this is the foundational school based learning experience for these young children.

The theory of inquiry known as Constructivism framed this study. Within the philosophical perspective of Constructivism, reality is defined as being constructed by the individual in the interaction between the mind (self) and the physical world (Paul, 2005). Constructivism is interpretive in nature in that it focuses on meaning-making activities of thinking people (Lincoln in Paul, 2005). The researcher seeks to understand participants of a study within a particular context in order to gain a deep understanding or verstehen of how the individual makes meaning in his/her life (Lincoln in Paul, 2005). Proponents of this perspective believe that values are infused and ever present throughout inquiry and the researcher must be mindful and respectful of the beliefs and values of individuals (Paul, 2005). Denzin (1994) states that the researcher's role is to listen carefully and with compassion (p.316) to the participant in order to deeply understand. This approach allows participants to express their beliefs in a climate of acceptance and empathy.

The construction of knowledge occurs in the interchange of experiences, practices and language (Denzin, 1994). This method of inquiry allows for the interpretation of social practices and the acceptance of different points of view. The constructivist method also provides a way to understand how humans make sense of the world (Eisner, 1997).

In this particular study, it was my hope that the interview process would give voice to the teachers' beliefs about play and its role in the classroom. Through conversations and reflections, teachers would be able to tell their own stories about their theories of practice and their experiences which shape their beliefs about play and young children with developmental delays. Their stories or narratives would become the

foundation for sharing their experiences in the classroom and through their narratives, other teachers and researchers would have access to those experiences (Bruner, 1987; Eisner, 1997). Through the telling of the participants' stories, their understandings and beliefs about play as a developmentally appropriate practice would have meaning for the greater community of public education for young children with developmental delays as well as teacher education.

Participants

The participants were eight Pre-Kindergarten Special Education teachers who teach in special education pre-kindergarten classrooms. They were recruited from a large southeastern public school district. They teach in different elementary schools throughout the district. Purposeful sampling was used to identify the participants for the study (Patton, 2002). The goal of the study was to develop an in depth understanding of a group of special educators' beliefs about play. Therefore, it was important to choose experienced Early Childhood Special Educators who as participants would provide rich information about their beliefs and teaching practices. Six of the participants were National Board Certified and two others embodied the tenets of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards although they had not gone through the formal certification process.

As a colleague, I was in a unique position to recruit the participants. As a resource teacher, I had the opportunity to observe these teachers in their classrooms, had had informal conversations with them about many aspects of Early Childhood Special

Education, and had participated in book studies and Professional Learning Communities with them. My professional role was supportive and collegial, not evaluative.

These participants were recruited because of the skills they demonstrated in their respective classrooms, the knowledge and leadership they brought to our Professional Learning Community meetings, their experiences in the field of Early Childhood Special Education and the respect other district teachers had for them. Some of the participants were trainers; others had participated in curriculum pilots, and research grants that placed them in leadership roles to become known across the school district. All had mentored teachers in various forms.

The eight participants were invited to the study through an invitation sent through the United States Postal Service. The invitation included a brief description of the study. The participants were asked to e-mail or phone if they were willing to participate. All of the invited participants agreed to participate. Table 2 illustrates the educational background and teaching experience of the participants.

Of the eight participants, five had Master's degrees and six were National Board Certified teachers. The range of overall teaching experience was from ten to twenty-four years. Four of the participants had taught another grade level for up to five years. One participant taught in other grade levels for eleven years and three taught in other grade levels for up to sixteen years. The range of Pre-K Special Education teaching experience was from seven to seventeen years; three had seven to ten years, three had eleven to fifteen years and two had fifteen to seventeen years. All participants held the required state certifications to be teachers of pre-kindergarten special education. All of them had numerous other teaching certifications that added to their expertise. These certifications

included Autism Spectrum Disorder, Elementary Education, Pre-K/ Primary Age Three to Grade 3, Special Education K-12, Mental Retardation (now referred to as Intellectual Disabilities, InD), Specific Learning Disabilities, Emotionally Handicapped Disabilities (now referred to as Emotionally Behaviorally Disturbed, EBD) , Educational Leadership, and ESOL Endorsement.

Table 2: Demographics of Participants

Characteristics	Number of Participants
Female	8
Highest Degree Earned	
Bachelor	8
Master	5
National Board Certification	6
Certifications Held	
2-4	6
5+	2
Years Teaching Pre-K ESE	
7-10	3
11-14	3
15-17	2
Years Teaching Other Grades	
0-5	4
6-10	1
11-16	3

The participants were educators who taught in prekindergarten classrooms that included three, four and five year old children who have been identified with a disability or developmental delay(s). Some children who are typically developing may be included in their classrooms. The participants were experienced teachers, of whom six hold National Board Certification by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS).

The National Board of Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) is based on five elements that are designed to improve teaching practice and student learning which

provides a professional development experience to teachers (Benson, Agran, & Yocom, 2010). The five elements are known as the Five Core Propositions which are the foundation for the Board's policy statement outlined in What Teachers Should Know and Be Able to Do (NBPTS.org, 2011). The propositions include: (1) Teachers are committed to students and their learning, (2) Teachers know the subjects they teach and how to teach them, (3) Teachers are responsible for managing and monitoring student learning, (4) Teachers think systematically about their practice and learn from experience and (5) Teachers are members of learning communities (NBPTS.org, 2011)

The focus of the first proposition is on National Board Certified Teachers' (NBCTs') commitment to their students and that they have knowledge and understanding of child development and learning. It states that NBCT's are cognitively and culturally responsive to the individual learning styles of children and are concerned with the development of moral character. It further states NBCT's are civically responsible.

The second proposition addresses the NBCT's knowledge of subject matter. NBCT's have in-depth knowledge of their subject area and know how to teach it to all learners using a variety of instructional strategies.

Effective instruction is the foundation of proposition three. It outlines how NBCT's use their own pedagogical knowledge to instruct and assess students in meaningful ways that promote engagement, interaction and motivation.

The fourth proposition centers on NBCT's systematic use of critical reading, thinking and practice as well as reflection to continually improve their teaching skills and to promote learning.

Collaboration and membership in learning communities is the fifth proposition. NBCT's collaborate regularly with their colleagues to enhance student learning. They are leaders in their schools and work with families and their colleagues to improve educational opportunities.

To be eligible for National Board Certification, applicants must have a baccalaureate degree, have taught for three years and have a valid teaching certificate from the state in which they work (Helms, 2000). There is a fee for the certification process that may or may not be financially supported by a school district. The fee is $2500 (NBCT.org). NBCT teachers may or may not receive financial remuneration for having successfully attained National Board certification.

National Board candidates engage in a year long, voluntary, ten part rigorous process that focuses on teaching practices and assessment of content knowledge. Each candidate develops a portfolio that consists of major components defined by NBPTS. Some components are performance assessments that require the teacher to use higher order thinking skills, analysis and reflection to adequately describe the lessons taught and videotaped. Other components include the documentation and reflection on teaching practices in the classroom in the form of observations, anecdotal records and student work.

Candidates must also cite their own professional accomplishments and reflect on how those accomplishments have impacted their school, community and student learning (Helms, 2000). The final component is a full day of computer-based exercises that assess content and pedagogical knowledge. Successful completion of the entire process, as judged by expert teachers, determines the candidates to be effective and accomplished

educators. Teachers who have completed the process claim it leads to improved teacher knowledge and skills as well as an increase in student performance and learning (Benson, et al., 2010).

National Board Certification is the standard of excellence in the profession. Teachers who are board certified are identified as experts who, by definition, regularly examine and reflect upon their teaching practices, stay current with best practices for learning and strive for ways to enhance student achievement and engagement (Hakel, Koenig & Elliot, ed. 2008). The purpose of this study was to learn what a group of expert Early Childhood Special Educators believes about play as a developmentally appropriate practice.

There are other measures of excellence for teachers which include advanced degrees, years teaching, other certifications held, and district level recognition of outstanding performance and leadership skills. These factors were considered in the determination of the purposeful sampling of the participants for the study.

The teacher participants invited to participate in this study were by definition, accomplished, expert Early Childhood Special Educators. They believed they used evidence-based practices in their classrooms. They regularly sought professional development opportunities as trainees or trainers. They were aware of current issues in early childhood education through their professional readings as evidenced by their personal participation in discussions at the district Professional Learning Community meetings. It was important to interview teachers who were comfortable in their knowledge and practice of Early Childhood Special Education and who would feel

confident to share their beliefs and ideas about play as a developmentally appropriate practice.

Instrument

A careful review of play literature revealed few studies in which Early Childhood Special Educators were interviewed about their beliefs about play in the prekindergarten classroom. One tool, 'Teacher Beliefs and Practices Survey: 3-5 year olds' developed by Burts, Buchanan, Benedict, Broussard, Dunaway, Richardson, & Sciaraffa (Kim, 2005) was used to examine the beliefs of kindergarten teachers. This survey instrument addresses numerous developmentally appropriate practices in the early childhood classroom with only a few questions that directly address play. While this instrument is useful in that it begins the conversation about play, it does not allow for a deep understanding of Early Childhood Special Educators' beliefs about play. Other studies examined different types of play within particular areas of the classroom such as in the House or Block areas or on particular types of play (Heisner, 2005; Hanline, Milton & Phelps, 2008; Kaugars & Russ, 2009). The literature on play and children with developmental delays focused on particular play interventions that were conducted by adults outside of the context of the classroom (Barton & Wolery, 2008). From this exploration into current research tools, it was concluded that a research instrument that captured Early Childhood Special Education teachers' beliefs about play as a developmentally appropriate practice in the prekindergarten classroom did not exist.

Because the focus of this study was Early Childhood Special Educators' beliefs about play it was important to develop an instrument that captured their perspectives and

allowed them ample opportunity to think and speak deeply and reflectively about the practice of play in their classrooms. While I recognized that a survey could capture a large number of educators' beliefs, I wanted this project to explore the beliefs of teachers acknowledged as among the best in the field of Early Childhood Special Education in a depth that was not reflected in simple answers to a survey (Kim, 2005).

Researching and reporting teachers' beliefs is a complex process. McMullen and Alat (2002) acknowledge that although the field of early childhood education has identified some factors that influence teachers' beliefs and how those beliefs are put into practice, there is still much to be learned. Educational background in terms of both level and coursework is one of the significant factors that impact teachers' beliefs in their implementation of developmentally appropriate practice of which play is an important element (McMullen & Alat, 2002). Although discrepancies have been identified between expressed philosophical beliefs and actual practices in the classroom; teachers who have had higher levels of education and more early childhood coursework implement more developmentally appropriate practices in their classrooms (McMullen, et al., 2006). In regards to the previous methods used to report teacher beliefs, Lee (2006) contends that closed question methods of capturing teacher beliefs are too simplistic and may not accurately reflect their true beliefs about what practices are evident in their classrooms.

Taking this complexity into consideration, I determined that a qualitative interview approach with degreed and certified Early Childhood Special Educators would be the most appropriate method for researching teachers' beliefs about play. The semi-structured interview was chosen because of the potential of the more open interview process to allow for the building of a relationship between the researcher and the

participant (Patton, 2002). It encouraged the participant to respond fully within the context of the interview (Weiss, 1994). The use of an interview as a central tool in the research design acknowledged the exchange of ideas in the formation of knowledge (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2003). Through the interview process in the context of a conversation, teachers' beliefs about play were captured. The open ended questions allowed each participant to expound on her own beliefs about play and how each believed play was implemented in her classroom.

Defined as a conversation between researcher and participant, the interview attempted to gather data through interaction (Cohen, et al., 2003). The interview allows the researcher a window into the perceptions of the participants and how the participants interpret their own perceptions (Weiss, 1994). Through the interview, teachers can describe what factors influence their beliefs and how those beliefs impact their work and relationships with children. In an interview, the researcher's role is to guide the participant through the process with careful attention to the study topic, to provide prompts for elaboration if needed and to ensure that the responses truly belong to the participant (Weiss, 1994).

Interview Questions

As I read the literature on play, the research and interview questions for my research emerged. The five research questions were the driving force of the study. The interview questions needed to be designed to answer those five questions. I wanted to know what Early Childhood Special Educators believed about play as a developmentally appropriate practice within the context of their own classrooms. Both the research and the interview questions needed to be provocative without being threatening. The questions

were designed to promote conversation and the exchange of ideas so that the participants would feel comfortable enough to discuss their beliefs about play. They were also written to elicit rich, detailed responses from the participants.

The interview questions were carefully constructed from a synthesis of the literature. I had examined literature on teacher beliefs about play (Kim, 2005; McMullen & Alat, 2002), play in the preschool classroom (Bodrova & Leong, 2005; Hanline, Milton & Phelps, 2008), the adult role in play (Ashiabi 2005; Trawick-Smith & Dziurgot, 2007), the play of children with disabilities (Barton & Wolery, 2010; Bray & Cooper, 2007) and the documented loss of play (Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff & Gryfe, 2008; Miller & Almon, 2009). The interview instrument can be found in Appendix B.

The research revealed little information on the beliefs of Early Childhood Special Educators. In the examination of the literature on Early Childhood Educators beliefs, I sifted through survey and interview questions to determine if the questions asked in those studies would pertain to this study (Adcock & Patton, 2001; Giovacco-Johnson, Lava & Recchia, 2004; Kim, 2005; Lara-Cinisomo, Fuligni, Daugherty, Howes & Karoly, 2009; Logue & Harvey, 2010; McMullen & Alat).

Teachers' beliefs impact their practice and also determine what they do in classrooms so it was imperative that questions about the special educators' beliefs be developed (McMullen & Alat, 2002; Smith, K. 1997 in Genishi et al, 1998). Because the focus of the study was to examine Early Childhood Special Educators' beliefs about play, four (questions 3, 5, 6 and 10) of the thirteen interview questions specifically addressed the participants' beliefs about play as a developmentally appropriate practice. Questions one, two and four were developed because it was important to know more about the

formal or informal education Early Childhood Special Educators may have had on their beliefs about play and its role in the classroom.

I wanted to learn how Early Childhood Special Educators apply their beliefs and perceptions about play in the classroom in order understand them better. Many studies had addressed multiple aspects of play in the early childhood education classroom through observation and or surveys of teachers (Bodrova & Leong, 2005; Coolahan, Fantuzzo, Mendez & McDermott, 2000; Rubin, Maioni & Hornung, 1976; Smilansky, 1968). Other studies focused on singular aspects of play like pretend play in children with disabilities (Barton & Wolery, 2010). But no study was found that examined how Early Childhood Special Educators implemented play in their classrooms. Directly correlated with Research Question Two, interview questions seven, eight, nine, and eleven investigate how play is carried out in the participants' classrooms.

Research Question Three and interview question ten were formulated out of the literature on the role of the adult in play as a developmentally appropriate practice (Ashiabi, 2005; NAEYC, 2009; Sandall, Hemmeter, Smith, & McLean, 2005; Trawick-Smith & Dziurgot, 2010). The purpose of this question was to learn what Early Childhood Special Educators believed was the role of the adult in play and how they as the adult in the preschool classroom supported play.

Interview questions twelve and thirteen are connected to Research Questions Four and Five. I wanted to know if the participants were experiencing the issues surrounding play that were apparent in the literature (Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff & Gryfe, 2008; Ginsburg, 2007; Miller & Almon, 2009). Specifically, I wanted to know what if any

barriers might hinder play in their classrooms and what supports they might need to fully implement play.

The developed instrument was a semi-structured interview protocol consisting of thirteen open- ended questions which guided the interview process. The open ended questions allowed the participant the opportunity to think reflectively with minimal risk of preconceived assumptions on the part of the researcher. This type of question also provided opportunity for elaboration and exploration of a belief or perspective in response to the question (Cohen, et al., 2003). The open-ended nature of the questions allowed for flexibility in responses and confirmed the individuality of each participant's perspectives and beliefs.

Table 3: Correspondence of Research Questions and Interview Questions

Research Questions	Interview Questions (See Appendix B)
1. What are Early Childhood Special Educators beliefs/perspectives on play as a developmentally appropriate practice in their classrooms and what factors influence their beliefs?	1, 2, 3, 4, 5,6
2. In what ways is play implemented in the classroom?	7,8,9,11
3. What do Early Childhood Special Educators believe about the role of the adult in play?	10
4. What, if any, are the barriers to play as a developmentally appropriate practice in Early Childhood Special Education classrooms?	12
5. What supports would enable Early Childhood Special Educators to implement play more fully as a developmentally appropriate practice?	13

It was important to ask a practitioner to examine the questions and provide feedback as to their appropriateness to the study and to the participants. After

construction of the interview protocol, I asked a National Board Certified Early

Childhood Educator to review the questions for clarity and understanding. It was hoped

that the questions were thought provoking without being threatening or confusing and

that they were open-ended so that the respondents would feel comfortable to respond at

their own pace and in their own manner and style. Subsequent discussions with this

educator confirmed that the interview questions correlated with the research questions,

asked what they were meant to ask and would serve as the foundations for conversations

with the participants. This practicing educator cautioned me to avoid being too academic

in the wording of the questions as she thought that may hinder the participants'

responses. We also discussed the conversational style in which the interview questions

would be asked and the ways that the participants would be encouraged to respond in

their own ways. We also discussed the types of settings that might be conducive to

comfortable conversations (personal communication, January 20, 2011).

<div align="center">Interview Process</div>

In preparation for the interviews, a digital recorder was purchased for the purpose

of recording the interviews. It was a small Sony recorder that would be unobtrusive to

casual observers in the public places where the interviews were to be held. The recorder

had various folders in which to record each of the interviews so that an interview would

not be accidently recorded over and irretrievably lost. At the time of the interview, I

assigned a number to the interviewee and identified the recording with that number. This

helped to ensure the anonymity of the participants. After each interview, I downloaded

the interview onto the hard drive of my computer in order to save it. Both the recorder

and my computer are stored carefully and safely. Each interview was transcribed by me

<div align="center">55</div>

in a private, secure location where the recording could not be overheard, again preserving anonymity of the participants.

As I prepared for the interviews, I considered how to analyze the qualitative data that would be generated. Seidel's (1998), Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) method, Noticing, Collecting, Thinking guided my thoughts on my approach to the data. Seidel describes this method as foundational to qualitative analysis. He states that it is at once iterative and progressive making it cyclical; it is also recursive and holographic (Seidel, 1998). In this type of analysis the researcher is noticing, thinking, collecting, thinking, and returning to the data, thinking, and noticing new things to collect and thinking again. Seidel maintains that the whole process is reflected in each step of the process.

Noticing is finding things in the data and recording them, reading them again and thinking about them, then coding them. Seidel (1998) compares this process to a jigsaw puzzle, examining and re-examining the data until it comes together as themes and patterns emerge.

<center>Pilot Process</center>

A pilot process was conducted to check out that the interview questions were appropriate to the purpose and focus of the study. The pilot study included two National Board Certified Early Childhood Special Educators. The pilot participants were interviewed using the semi-structured interview instrument. The pilot focused upon collecting evaluative feedback on issues of language clarity, length of the interview process and appropriateness of the questions to the study topic. Participants were asked to make suggestions to improve the transparency of the instrument.

<center>56</center>

It was important to determine if the questions were formulated to elicit the responses that would answer the research questions. In addition to answering the 13 interview questions, the first two participants were also asked if they felt that questions were appropriate and if they had any recommendations to change or add to any of the questions. The first participant realized that question number six was a closed question and required only a single yes or no response. This was confirmed with the second participant. Both participants were able to expand on the closed question. As a result, questions five and six were combined for the remaining interviews. The pilot process also provided an opportunity to hone my own interviewing skills: to learn to wait for responses, to learn not to fill the silences and to allow the participants to think, reflect and respond thoughtfully to each of the questions. It was important to allow the participants to expand on their responses and to provide their own stories to illustrate their responses with children's experiences in the classroom as well as their own experiences and with other professionals who work with them in their classrooms.

Informed Consent

A necessary foundation of trust between interviewer and interviewee must be established to ensure accuracy of the data (Seidman, Sullivan & Schatzkamer, 1983). This was accomplished through sharing an explicit, detailed description of my study with each participant at the start of each individual interview. I described the study, the interview process and how I hoped we would establish a research partnership. This helped to establish trust and a comfort level and allowed the participant to begin to think

about her beliefs about play and spark memories of incidents that enhanced the narrative during the actual interview (Weiss, 1994).

Each participant was given a copy of the informed consent document, the research questions and the interview questions. Informed consent was agreed upon and written consent was obtained before the interview began.

The Interviews

Before each interview, my own assumptions and biases were made explicit to each participant. Throughout each interview, I continually checked the appropriateness of the interview questions during the process of gathering the individual teacher's perspectives (Diefenbach, 2008). I was an active listener and approached each response critically to determine that the participant felt comfortable enough to be as truthful as possible about her beliefs about play as a developmentally appropriate practice (Seidman, et al., 1983; Diefenbach, 2008).

After receiving the initial verbal consent, I set up an interview time at a mutually convenient location in a public setting such as a restaurant or public park. Throughout the interviews it appeared that the participants were well accustomed to noisy, active environments as we alternately were exposed to loud leaf blowers, repetitive, pulsating Musak, wily waiters and other environmental interruptions. The participants seemed eager to share their thoughts, beliefs and ideas despite distractions.

Permission was asked and obtained to tape-record each of the interviews. All of the participants agreed to be tape-recorded. They were informed that I would transcribe the recording and share the transcriptions with them to confirm accuracy. I also took field notes during each interview. The interviews ranged in length from an hour and a half to

three hours. The time range reflects both the comfort and talkative levels of each participant. Each participant appeared comfortable with the setting and me to converse openly about their beliefs and perceptions of play as a developmentally appropriate practice. The interviews were characterized by shared experiences and knowledge between interviewer and participant, by classroom stories that illustrated their beliefs and perceptions and by laughter and mutual respect for the wonderment of children. Every participant appeared to enjoy the opportunity to talk about her beliefs, her work and her thoughts about the role of play in the education of young children with disabilities.

Interviewing multiple teachers allowed for a cross-check of the responses, emergent patterns and more complex understanding of the issues presented (Diefenbach, 2008). The interview process also provided me with a richer understanding of the participants' beliefs through the emergence of themes that unfolded from the thoughtful responses of the participants as they told their own stories.

Throughout the interviews as data were generated I continued to think about the framework of the analysis. The interview questions directly corresponded to the research questions and the research questions arose out of issues surrounding play as a developmentally appropriate practice. Patton (2002) suggests using the issues as a framework for the organization and reporting of the data. Keeping the purpose of the study in mind, balanced with the issues of play created a framework that allowed me to collect and begin to analyze the data as the participants conversed openly and honestly about their beliefs and experiences.

After the interviews and the initial transcriptions, I decided a case study for each participant interviewed noting individual beliefs, perspectives, educational backgrounds

and experiences would assist the analysis of the data (Patton, 2002). Then, I determined

that a cross-case analysis of the interviews which grouped similar responses, beliefs and

experiences would be the next step in the analysis. Seidel's (1998) approach of Collect,

Notice and Think also helped to frame the analysis.

Data Analysis

Analysis of data includes interpretation, summary and integration of the collected

data (Weiss, 1994). The data were organized by interview question and then analyzed

using pattern, theme and content analysis to ascertain frequent themes, direct

interpretation and triangulation. The data were coded and major themes identified

through issue-focused analysis (Weiss, 1994). Coding categories were developed

through an on-going process that involved interaction with the transcripts of the

interviews. This required continual thought and reflection about the material (Seidel,

1998). Sense was made of the data through the identification of patterns and themes,

through unpacking individual teachers' beliefs and perspectives and through the

emergence of identified factors that influence their beliefs. Each interview was

individually summarized and then a composite summary was constructed to capture the

collective nature of the participants' statements as part of the analysis (Patton, 2002;

Cohen, et al., 2003). This helped to ensure the cohesion of the collective experiences of

the participants.

The first step in the analysis after the interviews was to transcribe the interviews

and read the field notes. Once the transcriptions were complete, the written transcriptions

were sent to each participant so they could confirm that these were their responses. Each

transcription was confirmed by the participant to be accurate. Some participants included another anecdote or additional thoughts about play as they reflected on the interview and read the transcript. The field notes were compared to the interview transcriptions for emerging themes and patterns. A case study was written for each of the participants in order to have a clear understanding of their individual statements and experiences (Patton, 2002; Weiss, 1994).

All of the interviews were compiled into a single document to ease the manipulation of the data. Then, in another document, I grouped all of the responses by interview question in order to begin to analyze the data. This cross-case analysis allowed for the grouping of similar responses, beliefs and experiences (Patton, 2002). I numerically coded each response with the participant's number so that I would be assured of the individuality of the response and I could attribute responses to the correct participant. As I grouped responses, I began to sift through and sort responses and identify quotations that I thought would enhance the analysis (Seidel, 1998). I looked for similarities and differences in their responses, patterns and emerging themes. I color coded the emerging themes that evolved out of the interviews. These emerging themes began to form a collective narrative as I reread and grouped the responses.

After grouping all responses by interview question, I created a color coded chart of the emerging themes that evolved out of the interviews. These themes included: typical peers, disability, play schemas or scenarios, change in play over time (the school year), curricular changes that impact play, toys or materials, parents and other professionals' responses to pre-kindergarten special education and play, and professional development. Then, I created a poster chart of each of the research questions and assigned the interview

question responses to the particular research question. The emerging themes fit as subcategories under the five research questions.

Figure One represents the process of assigning the emerging themes to the research questions and demonstrates the inter-relatedness of the themes as well as the continuity of the process as participants' responses were read, analyzed, and compared and contrasted. As Seidel (1998) stated it was similar to putting pieces of a puzzle together under the central idea of play as a developmentally appropriate practice.
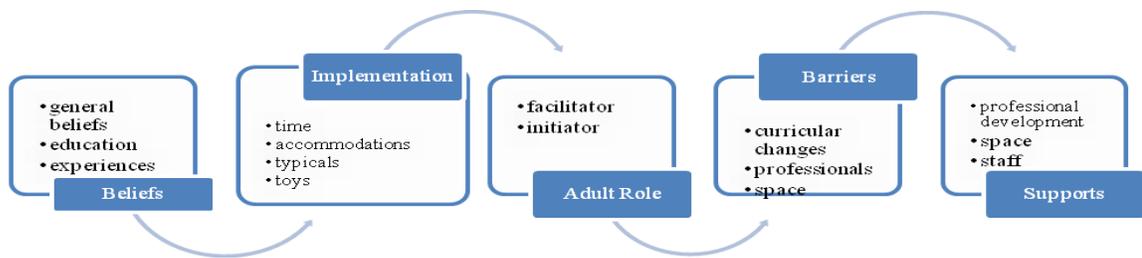
Figure 1: Emerging Themes

Reliability

Within the qualitative approach, reliability is described by the fit between what the researcher gathers and reality as well as the dependability of the data (Cohen, et al., 2003). The design allowed the participants to describe their beliefs in their own words in the interview and then to confirm their responses after the transcription and analysis. In this study, the interviews, the field notes, the analysis products were compared and

contrasted for consistency and dependability (Golafshani, 2003). Field notes were taken and made available to the participants to check for accuracy. Participant quotations and descriptions were used to allow their beliefs to be told in their own words. They were asked to confirm that the statements were their own. The semi-structured interview questions allowed for some uniformity in response that supported the coding and categorization as themes emerged. The pilot study addressed issues of coherence and clarity.

Validity

Validity was checked through member checking. Efforts were made to minimize bias through the establishment of rapport between researcher and participant, practiced inquiry techniques, consistent coding and careful recording of the data (Cohen, et al., 2003). The results were not generalizable due to the small sample but do provide evidence that can be used to inform practice and professional development about Early Childhood Special Educators' beliefs about play and children with disabilities in prekindergarten classrooms. Investigator triangulation was used to confirm authenticity and plausibility, essential factors that support truthfulness in qualitative research (Golafshani, 2003). A practicing National Board Certified Early Childhood Educator who has taught young children with special needs read the study. She stated that the teachers' stories rang true and the written portrayal of their stories made her feel as if she was present for the interviews (personal communication, August 1, 2011).

Presented are the individual and collective perspectives of the Early Childhood Special Educators' beliefs about play. This exploration of these teachers' perspectives

gives voice to the role of play in early childhood special education classrooms and affords them the opportunity to inform those outside the classroom how young children learn and develop into lifelong learners.

Ethics

A completed application was submitted to the University of South Florida's Institutional Review Board which included a description of the study, participant selection information, and copies of informed consent forms. IRB approval was granted. Permission from the school district was obtained. Every effort was made to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of each participant.

Participation in the study was voluntary. Participants were formally invited to the study and were offered the opportunity to decline. Every effort was made to limit the impact on their professional and personal lives by scheduling the interviews at times that were convenient to the participants in public places that were within easy access for them.

Relationship with the Participants

My professional relationship as a resource teacher for the teachers in the study may be considered a limitation. My role is to provide instructional and materials support and to develop trainings for Pre-K Special Education teachers in the district. Our established relationship seemed to enhance the teachers' comfort levels and afforded them the opportunity to speak openly and honestly about their pedagogical beliefs and concerns about play.

For all of the participants, it was hoped that my dual perspective provided the foundation for a relationship that offered a safe way for them to speak openly. It appeared that a level of mutual respect was established because I was able to relate to their stories of play and children with developmental delays because I have lived similar experiences as a classroom teacher and continue as a supporter of children and teachers. I believe that my dual role encouraged the narrative (Denzin, 1994). As teachers working within a public system, we have shared institutional knowledge and our own individual perspectives about how play for children with developmental delays in prekindergarten classrooms fits in the context of public school education. I have also successfully completed the National Board certification process and am a National Board Certified Teacher.

I believe the relationship between the researcher and the participants is one of collegiality and support. The participants appeared eager to participate. They seemed to welcome the opportunity to converse about their ideas about play and their teaching practice. It is possible that they agreed to participate because of our professional relationship but there does not appear to be any evidence that they felt they had to take part in the study.

Every attempt was made to make it clear that my role as a researcher did not impact my role as a professional working with them in the district. I assured the teacher/participants that their interviews and any corresponding conversations would be confidential and that they would not be identified in the study.

Chapter Summary

This chapter outlines the research design, revisits the research questions and shows the correspondence between the research questions and the interview questions. It provides the demographic information about the participants. It also describes the interview process and the data analysis of the interviews, reliability and validity, the ethics that guide the study and explores in depth the researcher's relationship to the participants.

CHAPTER FOUR

Findings

This purpose of this study was to examine Early Childhood Special Educators'
beliefs and perceptions about play as a developmentally appropriate practice. Eight Early
Childhood Special Educators participated in the study. The findings were obtained
through the research instrument of a semi-structured interview. The same interview
protocol was used for each interview. Participants were provided with the opportunity to
expand on or clarify their responses during the interview. They confirmed the accuracy of
the transcriptions of their interviews and in some cases, offered additional reflections or
anecdotes about play in their respective classrooms. This chapter reports the findings of
the study by research question.

Research Question One

What are Early Childhood Special Educators beliefs/perspectives on play as a
developmentally appropriate practice in their classrooms and what factors influence those
beliefs?

The interview questions pertaining to this first research question were (1) How do
you define play, (2) What is your understanding of the different types of play, (3) In what
ways do you believe play influences/impacts a child's development and learning, (4)
How have your own educational experiences influenced your beliefs about the role and
implementation of play in school readiness, (5) What is your perception of play, and (6)
Is play as you perceive it an integral part of the daily classroom routine? As the

participants responded to the interview questions, it was obvious that their responses

could be fluid between the questions and as they talked and expanded on an answer each

would begin to address other interview questions.

As the collective narrative was forming through the stages of analysis, it became

apparent that the fluidity of the responses could be grouped as themes within the

interview questions under the auspice of the first research question. The participants'

responses are italicized and identified with their assigned number at the end of each

response.

Table 4 summarizes the participants' responses to Research Question one which

includes interview questions one, two, three, four, five and six.

Table 4: Beliefs: Summary Table: Research Question One

# of Participants	General Definition of Play (1)	Factors that Influence Beliefs (2 & 4)	Beliefs of Impact of Play (3)	Beliefs of Role of Play (5 & 6)
4	Active exploration	Professional Learning Communities	Delay in play skills can result in gaps in generalizing learning	
3	Vital to development			Should be thematically integrated
2	Children's own thoughts and imagination enacting life	National Board process		
5	How children learn and process information		Influences learning through social interaction, skill building; foundation for learning	Helps to develop spatial concepts, sensory experiences, pre-literacy and math skills
1	Many definitions	Own teaching experiences; own school experience	Can drive the curriculum; helps to build schema for life experiences	Playful opportunities embedded; builds social skills
8	Adults can support play through interaction and provision of materials; promote developmental skills through play	Professional Readings-journal articles or books; knowledge gained through education that play is foundation for learning	Definite impact on learning; low skill level can impact future academic success; Parents and other professionals need understanding of play	Crucial to readiness/ integral to routine; need multiple opportunities to explore materials and role play to be prepared for more formal instruction
4	Adults link learning to play	Collaboration with colleagues	Play makes learning meaningful	

General Definitions of Play

(Interview Question 1)

All of the participants stated that they thought play was vital to young children's development. They defined it as child chosen, child centered, child directed, intrinsically motivating. Four participants defined play as the active exploration of children attempting to make sense of the world around them. One participant describes it succinctly as the whole child. *Play is what they bring to the table (6).* Another participant reflected on her observations of children.

> *When I watch a child play it is like she is trying to practice what she has been told about but she doesn't quite understand and she is trying to figure it out. As we have done more play with the kids I think it is stuff they have seen somewhere before and they don't know what to do with it yet (2).*

Each of the participants used many adjectives to describe or define play: exploratory, interactive, intrinsically motivating, participatory, exciting, fun, powerful, creative, social, and imaginative. Three participants defined play as children using their own thoughts and imaginations to act out scenarios of their lives, not just what they see at home, but at school and on TV. For instance, on the playground,

> *we play outside; we are going to Disney World. We are all in the car, whoops, we hit a pot hole. We are honking at things in the road, like a cow in the road (8).*

Five stated that play is how children learn and process information. *Play is how little people learn (3).* Three participants stated that children may need multiple opportunities to play out their thoughts and ideas as they process and learn. One participant suggested that play has many definitions and dimensions.

>*I think play is made up of many pieces. It has to do with creativity and imagination on various levels. You have the basic level where you take a toy and just roll it but when it really becomes play when you add the creativity part and make it do something like it goes down the ramp and to the gas station (7).*

All of the participants declared that adults may provide materials and help to flesh out ideas; adults can join in and can incorporate developmental skills into play to facilitate progress and skill development.

>*We might have provided materials, and thrown out some ideas there but we really let them set the stage and set the characters (2).*

Four stated that adults can make academic tasks playful and fun by planning engaging and interactive activities.

Factors that Influence Beliefs/Perceptions

(Interview Question 4)

The data suggest that factors that influence their beliefs about play include their formal educational background and their own teaching experiences identified as "on the job training" by all of the participants. All cited independent, ongoing professional readings including journal articles and books, book studies with other Pre-K Special Educators as significant sources for knowledge and foundations for their beliefs.

>*Reading various books about play and attending a workshop made me really think about play. I know I need more time to play (2).*

Another participant explicitly stated that she is

>*always learning through teaching experiences, collaborating and sharing with colleagues,* because she *thinks it is important that we integrate play throughout the day because it is how children learn (3).*

.For her, it seems as if the learning for her and her students is cyclical and continuous. The more she learns about play, the more she can plan for it, expand and enhance it; which in turn, builds skills and social interactions in the classroom which increase qualitatively and quantitatively as the children progress. For four of the participants, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), workshops, and professional development trainings that focus on developmentally appropriate practices were cited as influences. For example, *in our PLC, we talk a lot about what is good for young children and play is at the center of all that (5).* One participant identified her own schooling experience as an influence on her practice. One influence is

> *my own school experience with wonderful teachers that truly supported and respected me. School was nurturing, the teachers really cared about us, took time to really listen to us and really taught us. I hope I am giving my kids that! (6).*

Her experience of school as a nurturing and developmentally appropriate was reflected in her belief that this is how she hopes her own teaching practice is now defined.

Two participants identified the National Board process as having a specific impact on their beliefs about play as a developmentally appropriate practice. Four participants cited collaboration with other professionals including speech pathologists who provide support to their classrooms and who may plan or share ideas with them as having an influence on their beliefs. All participants identified play as the foundation for learning and a "best practice" or developmentally appropriate practice for the early childhood special education classroom.

We must look at best practices for young children first and foremost, we must have those pieces in place, play as a developmentally appropriate practice. As special educators, we are attuned to looking at difference instead of same, which is a good thing, some of our students will need more supports, accommodations, visuals,...but we must have the foundational best practices in place first, whatever the disability might be and then look at each child's strengths and needs(5).

Beliefs/Perceptions of the Influence/Impact of Play on Learning
(Interview Questions 2 & 3)

All of the participants declared that play impacts development. Individually and collectively, their stated responses strongly embraced the belief that play has a significant impact on learning.

It seems so simple because it is what we do and who we are. But it is everything. It's everything (4). It is developing everything, your pre-literacy and your pre-math skills and your social emotional skills and your ability for just being able to, at the most basic level, imitate. That's the basis of all learning. You have to be able to imitate. You have to be able to problem solve (5).

. Four participants stated that play makes learning meaningful because the child is purposeful and engaged in the active exploration of his/her environment. Five stated that play influences development and learning by providing social interaction, fine and gross motor skill building, problem solving opportunities and allows children to work through ideas or thoughts they don't fully understand.

I don't know that there is a word that is big enough (to describe play's impact) *It is huge. It is enormous! It is a child's developmental learning. Children learn through play. Play to learn, learn to play. Part of developing into a person, everything should be playful. Everything should be playful! What a relief to read that as a pre-k teacher...to come to that understanding. I thought the ABCs and 123s were what I had to do and to have them be ready for kindergarten and to pay attention and you get hung up on that and I certainly had my learning experiences*

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myself. But, what a relief (it is) to know, that if we are playing we are learning. I cannot emphasize enough the importance of playing (6).

Another participant voiced that

> *play can drive the curriculum. It is the daily classroom routine! Integrate play and learning thematically. It is integral and should be the philosophical underpinning for all of pre-k because it helps to prepare children academically, socially and emotionally for kindergarten (3).*

As pre-kindergarten teachers of special education, all of them talked about the low level or lack of play skills and play experiences of the children who enter their classrooms and how they must work hard to develop those skills. Each participant expressed concerns about the children they taught and how much support the individual children need to become successful learners. One teacher stated: *our children need more supports, accommodations and visuals (4).* Another teacher said:

> *play does not come naturally for all people with autism. There are kids who may access it in a different way but the typical play that expands and broadens and gets richer and becomes full just doesn't fall out of the sky. We must provide some direction and instruction (5).* Another said: *You put a whole self-contained class that doesn't know how to play and you don't know what to do and you are starting with nothing. Unless you give them play schemas, they don't know. Starting off with a bunch of threes* (three year olds) *who have no idea how to play, how to build with blocks. So, I had to show them; you can build with these blocks, you can build a house, and you can have the fire truck come to the house and say there is a fire and somebody is on the top and they are screaming. Giving them the schemas was the only way I could get the play going (8).*

All eight participants acknowledged that parents and professionals need to have an understanding of the types of play and how play skills evolve. They expressed concern that parents and other professionals had limited understanding of child development and appropriate developmental expectations for young children. Inappropriate expectations

could lead to misunderstandings about the individual child's strengths and needs which could negatively impact instructional planning for learning. For example, one teacher stated:

> *We do need to recognize that there are different stages of play because if somebody for example, is in the solitary stage, they are not yet ready to come to that imaginative play. There is a lot of stuff in between. So, expecting people to go to House and dress up in costumes and engage in pretend play which all the time we see on IEP goals and wow, wait a minute though, you are telling me that this youngster doesn't have appropriate toy play and you want him to engage in pretend play(5)?*

The participants' students are identified as developmentally delayed in one or more areas of development or at risk for learning difficulties. Some of the children may have difficulty with joint attention, social interaction, language usage and theory of mind. Some of the children have a diagnosed disability.

> *At* ages *three and four, we are working with kids who are eighteen months and two years of age developmentally. I cannot force a lot of what I think is the important part of play (2).*

Three participants noted that *the lack of play skills/play experiences was evident in our classrooms (3, 4, and 5).*

The data suggest that many children in the participants' classrooms do not have yet have fundamental toy or object play because of their developmental delay or their limited accessibility to appropriate play materials or experiences. *A lot of my students do not yet understand cause and effect which limits their play (7).* Another described a child's play as atypical.

> *I have a little boy whose play is not typical. His play is dumping everything and then lining it up (1.) In some of our economically challenged families, people are trying to put food on the table and there may not be additional funds for them to have different types of toys and even toys or a variety of things that engage children in different ways(5).*

Four of the participants believed that children with delays in their play skills have difficulty generalizing skills and *conjuring images and roles if they have had limited practice using their imaginations and role playing (8).* This perspective taking or theory of mind is important because the child must be able to take on another role and understand the stance of the role he is playing in order for the play to proceed as well as understand himself in the play. All of the participants identified pretend play as the ultimate play goal for their children but some worried that without enough instruction and practice, the pretend play skills could not be attained.

> *What an important piece our social emotional learning is to access collaborative play that way, even if you have a great imagination and your language skills are pretty good and you can communicate all of those things, but you cannot include other people it* (play) *doesn't really have the meaning you would want it to have (4).*

Five participants said that play is vital because it is the foundation for all learning.

> *Gaps in play skills can result in future gaps in other developmental and academic skills, science for example, if the child hasn't grasped the basic concept of cause and effect through the manipulation of toys or through verbal and nonverbal interactions with others, he/she will definitely have difficulty with more complex concepts(7).*

One participant articulated that *play helps to build schemas for later in life, for writing and storytelling and other things in life that use imagination and creativity* (8).

Beliefs/Perceptions of the Role of Play in School Readiness/Integral to the Classroom

(Interview Questions 5 & 6)

All of the participants reported that play was a crucial aspect of school readiness and an integral part of the daily classroom routine.

> *Play should be the philosophical underpinning for all of pre-k*
> *because it helps to prepare children academically, socially and*
> *emotionally for kindergarten (3).*

Three participants stated that play should be thematically integrated with learning and that play can drive the curriculum. Five stated that through play children developed spatial concepts, had sensory experiences, built pre-literacy and math skills and without the play opportunities, later learning and participation are impacted.

> *It* (play) *is developing everything, your pre-literacy and your pre-*
> *math skills and your social emotional skills and your ability for*
> *just being able to at the most basic level, being able to imitate.*
> *That's the basis of all learning. You have to be able to imitate. You*
> *have to be able to problem solve (5).*

One participant described how she plans instruction in her classroom. She described the hours she spent preparing to ensure that she differentiated instruction to meet diverse needs and to set the stage for interactive learning.

> *I spend many hours planning in order to provide playful learning*
> *opportunities throughout the day. You have to layer, layer, and*
> *layer your instruction. I don't waste one single minute. I am*
> *thinking about every transition, every minute that they are playing.*
> *What can I give them, how can I arrange the room, what can I do,*
> *expanding on their interests, that sort of thing. It takes a lot of*
> *time, a lot of thought and a lot of reflection (6).*

All eight participants stated that children must have multiple opportunities to explore materials and role play in order to be prepared for more formal instruction. One

participant stated that playful opportunities are embedded throughout the daily routine in

order to provide children opportunities to interact, be silly and engage with others in

different ways. She thought that each of these opportunities was also a learning

experience. Another teacher participant said that play helped children to build the social

skills they would need to be successful in school. It teaches them appropriate ways to

advocate for themselves in order to get their needs met and their ideas across as well as to

make and be a good friend.

> *The natural development of all of those readiness things, I think*
> *people underestimate kids, even kids with delays and challenges,*
> *those interests naturally come. We don't push a letter of the day or*
> *all of that kind of stuff. But today, I had two or three people*
> *copying down letters and looking at what their friend wrote and*
> *then writing another one and then looking at the pig. I didn't tell*
> *them to do that, they just did it. They do, because they are*
> *comfortable and confident. They have experienced so much that is*
> *the next cool thing to do. If you don't push it sometimes stuff*
> *happens on its own. Sometimes, natural time comes into it (4).*

Research Question Two

In what ways or how is play implemented in the classroom?

Table 5: Play in the Classroom: Summary of Research Question Two
 (Interview Questions 7 & 8)

Participant	Bell Play	Circle	Center Time	Outside	Other done in small group and teacher directed
1 (play all day)	(small play)		1 hour (child initiated)	45 minutes (child initiated)	
2	15-30 minutes/teacher structured		45 min-1 hour Includes planning (child initiated)	30 minutes (child initiated)	30-45min different days of the week/yoga YMCA, parachute
3	15-20 minutes/teacher structured		1 hour (child initiated)	30 minutes (usually child initiated)	1 hour/Bike riding, parachute
4/5	30 minutes (teacher structured)		45 minutes (child initiated)	30-40 minutes (child initiated)	1 hour
6 (play all day)			1 hour (child initiated)	30 minutes (child initiated	30 minutes
7		15 min	1 hour 3x wk Alternate w/ Music, Cooking and Science (child initiated)	30 minutes	Yoga, YMCA, social skills through play
8	30 minutes Teacher structured		45minutes -1hour (child initiated)	30-45minutes (usually child initiated)	

Interview questions (7), how much time is devoted to play in your classroom (8), how much is child initiated play, how much is adult initiated play, (9) describe the types of play you observe/facilitate/structure in your classroom and (11) what, if any accommodations do you make to support individuals, fell under this research question. Types of play observed (9) were summarized in a separate table. Accommodations (11) were summarized in a separate table. Again, fluidity across responses was evident as the participants described their daily routines, told specific stories to illustrate a point or expanded on their thoughts as they thought about play in their individual classrooms.

Table 5 illustrates how the participants described play across the daily routine in their classrooms. Participants varied in how they defined play across the day and that impacted their description of the implementation of play throughout the daily routine. Two thought the whole day was play based and did not distinguish between small group instruction and other activities. Five asserted that because the activities surrounding particular themes were playful they counted as play. Three were more specific in defining their routine and compartmentalizing elements of the day. Some differences were also school driven in that some of the classes went directly to the cafeteria for breakfast before starting their day and others had time in the classroom that provided the children with more opportunities to play before the actual instructional day began. While all had defined Center Times that were described as play only one participant described Circle Time as play. All participants had a regularly scheduled Outside Time. Less regularly scheduled were more defined types of adult structured play that included parachute play, bike riding, yoga, and field trips to the local YMCA.

The participants talked about the room environment and how they structure it for play opportunities. All participants described how they created learning centers and extended the curricular themes across centers and activities to enhance engagement and generalization of concepts. Room arrangement and appropriate materials were important elements of the implementation of play.

> *I have play centers that are much more interactive and then there are centers that are more solitary play where maybe you would do puzzles or you would use scissors or markers. You could interact with somebody but you wouldn't have to. But if you were in a more dramatic center you would have to. You would be encouraged too. Because it is a special ed population, I am always trying to get them to interact with somebody and not do too much solitary play because they tend to do that anyway. The benefit of being at school is to have other people around and use those social opportunities (2).*

As all of them counted the amount of time spent in play as they defined it; they then compared it to the number of hours spent in school. All participants said it was not enough time for play. They acknowledged the confines of the school day schedule in the context of how they implement play in their classrooms. The six hour school day includes two mealtimes, naptime, and toileting time, time for transitions, therapies and occasional school wide events. This question caused each participant to reflect on how much time was actually spent in play in their classroom and contemplate that in conjunction with their stated belief in the importance of play.

> *It really makes you think –you have them for six hours and only an hour and a half is play. We have three year olds trying to adapt to a four year old schedule and we have five year olds trying to adapt to a four year old schedule. We are trying to teach to the middle of the road but have accommodations for the three year olds. If you look out how they play outside of a school building, they play and then they rest and they might read a story and they play some more and they come back and they might do a finger play and a song and then they go play some more. We don't have that opportunity in school to let them go outside every three hours and let them come back in (3).*

Child initiated/Adult initiated

(Interview Question 8)

The participants were flexible in their description of how much play was child initiated and adult initiated. In general, the participants thought that most of the play was child initiated. One participant described Center Time as the children's opportunity to *lead, create and imagine (3).*

> *I want the play to be their own ideas. If they are working*
> *something through and then I tell them they cannot play there then*
> *I have just limited them. But with a three year old and she just*
> *wants to explore puzzles for a week, well, that is what she should*
> *do. She never would have figured out the puzzles if I had told her*
> *no (2).*

It appeared that the amount of child initiation was dependent on the skill level of the individual child which is an important guiding principle of the early childhood special education classroom.

> *Children can choose where they want to play and what they want*
> *to do there unless a child is stuck making a single choice and then*
> *I will manipulate his choice to help move him along to other*
> *choices (2).*

Outside activities and opportunities for play were varied by school. All of the participants called it Outside Play. Each school had an outdoor playground, an area for running and a tricycle area. Some schools had sand areas or sand tables. All of the areas had play materials for the children as well as natural items in the environment.

> *Most of outside time is child initiated. It is really their time to be*
> *on their own because most of their day is orchestrated by adults so*
> *I think they should let loose on the playground. Occasionally,*
> *outside time is teacher directed if there is a new activity or skill I*
> *want to introduce. (3)*

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Types of Play Observed/Facilitated/Structured
(Interview Questions 2 and 9)

Table 6: Types of Play Observed: Impressions of Play: Summary Table

Type of Play	# of Participants
Solitary	5
Cooperative	4
Variety	1
Variances in Skills between older and younger students	2
Usefulness of free play for assessment	1
Change in amount and level of play over year	8
Play schemes (child and adult initiated)	8
Use of typical peers to facilitate play	4

The participants as a whole did not have a lot of confidence in their academic

knowledge of types of play when asked in the interview but they were very perceptive in

what they observed in their classrooms and in the individual differences in play displayed

by children. Five described many of the children as solitary players who do not yet have

the skills to parallel play or cooperatively play with their peers. Through observation, the

participants learned about their children's strengths and needs and determined how to

facilitate and structure play opportunities.

> *One child plays alone; another is an observer of play. Another has*
> *an unusual approach. He dumps the materials and then lines them*
> *up. I attempt to join in or get him to join us but he returns to his*
> *way of play (1).*

. Another participant describes the spectrum of skills she observed in her classroom.

> *I observed all types of play from one child alone perseverating on a toy to a typical peer orchestrating 2 or 3 other children to pretend to have a picnic or ride a train (2).*

This participant posted a developmental checklist in the House Center to help guide her observations. She would then compare the checklist to the daily anecdotal notes she wrote.

> *It helped to understand the children's individual developmental levels and to guide my play instruction. I learned so much by referring to the checklist. If I went to where I was going to go I would have pushed them too far. They weren't ready for that (2).*

Another participant observed differences in the play skills between her younger and older students. She found that the youngest most often played in isolation and the oldest engaged in cooperative play with each other. *I observe a lot of individual play or play in isolation with our very youngest and collaborative, cooperative play with the older children (3).* This difference in skill ability sometimes made for tension in the classroom.

> *Sometimes the children will invite me over. If I have to help a younger student, their feelings get hurt. I feel really bad for them because, this one little girl will say, Ms. M you don't like me anymore? No, no, that's not it. I just need to help your friend. Then, if I don't get back over to her she feels very slighted. I don't want her to feel slighted. She took the time to invite me into her play, so I need to find the balance so that I can be sure my three year old is being safe in what he is doing and yet I can participate with her (3).*

One participant identified observation of free play as an excellent opportunity for assessment. In her class, she carved out enough time one day a week that she named Free Center Time. The children are allowed to choose where they want to play and the two

adults observe the children in action. She uses this time to observe the children's skills, to

determine what level of play each child is working on and if there are gaps in the play

skills.

> *This is an opportunity to really examine individual children's*
> *behaviors and correct some of my assumptions about the children.*
> *For example, if a child has taken a toy from another child, I used*
> *to think the child just wanted the toy and snatched it but now after*
> *careful observation, I see that it is an attempt to interact with the*
> *other child. But the child may not have the verbal social skills to*
> *ask to play with the child (7).*

This observation time allows the teacher to identify the child's strengths and

needs. She felt this was an invaluable time for her children.

> *The free choice time gives children confidence to feel more in*
> *control and more like leaders. You see who is rising up in the*
> *classroom to become the leaders. I believe most children should*
> *become leaders and followers because they are both important*
> *skills and they both can be done through play (7).*

Two participants reported that the age or developmental difference is very evident

in block play. Block play is one of the most popular centers for all of the children but

their different play plans can lead to disaster. The older children are ready to build

structures and the younger children just want to knock them down. In my class, *they are*

quite skilled at block play and don't need any adult support (6). In another class,

> *we have a lot of great block play. I have friends who are building*
> *great things but are worried that a little buddy is going to come*
> *and kick it over. I cannot guarantee that it won't happen. I feel so*
> *bad for him (1).*

The participants talked about the variances in their teaching practices for

observation, structuring and facilitating play over the school year. All stated that their

instructional approach changes depending on the time of year and the skill levels of the

children.

It varies depending on the time of year and the skill level. This year because the class was mostly threes, I had to structure a lot of the play. Last year when they were all almost five, they didn't need that so I saw more cooperative and interactive play (8).

Another teacher states,

we do provide more support at the beginning for the kids and the we try to fade support as quickly as possible because as soon as we see you begin to initiate on your own then we are fading out (5).

The participants emphasized the importance of knowing the children as individuals as well as being aware of their developmental skills.

Children come in throughout the year and depending on what stage they are in, you are constantly trying to bring them to the next level. At the beginning, it is a lot more adult initiated. For example, at the very beginning of the year, we had centers we were just showing them how to play with materials and how to clean up, you know, the whole procedure process, they were not interacting at all and a lot were not even using the materials the way they were intended to be used or with creativity. Some children would just pick up the Legos and stare at them. He wouldn't get the social component. At the beginning it is a lot more adult initiated. Then as they gain the skills it becomes more child initiated (7).

Play Schemes

Play schemes emerged as a theme under Interview Question Nine. As participants described the types of play observed, structured or facilitated in their classrooms, the use of play schemes as an instructional and supportive strategy became apparent. The participants described play schemes as teacher directed scenarios that they created using props and other materials to help the children engage in role playing and interaction with each other in order to learn other's perspectives. The schemes were developed based on the concepts being taught in the curriculum and on the children's strengths and needs. Play schemes were universally used by all participants to enhance play in their

classrooms. All stated that they planned for and explicitly taught play schemes to the

children because their play skills were delayed or non-existent. For example, one teacher

states, *Play does not come naturally for all people with Autism.* The children have

> *a very limited kind of play schema that we need to expand. There*
> *are kids who may access it in a different way but the typical play*
> *that expands and broadens and gets richer and becomes full just*
> *doesn't fall out of the sky so we need to be directive (5).*

Another participant noted that play for children with communication delays may

be impacted in ways that are different so teachers must be aware of individual

differences, communicative abilities and developmental levels. One participant

emphasized the need for the awareness and understanding of the developmental levels of

children with special needs.

> *At ages 3 and 4, we are working with children who are 18 months*
> *or 2 years old developmentally and it is not appropriate to force a*
> *lot of what I think is the importance of play. The children are not*
> *ready to do object substitution and play with others. I cannot*
> *facilitate more than really where he is now except maybe to move*
> *him along a little faster (2).*

All participants described using play schemes to help the children visualize and enact

events. The schemes gave them opportunities to learn to use the toys and other materials

appropriately and to role play. The teachers created play schemes based on curricular

themes and set them up in various Centers in the classrooms. At the beginning of the

school year, the teachers observed that the children did not know how to play with the

materials or with each other.

> *In the House Center, they take all of the stuff out and put it on the*
> *table and just kind of look at it. So, we add play schemes to teach*
> *them what to do in the Center (7).*

After explicitly teaching the scheme in the centers, the children begin to develop their

pretend play skills and learn to interact with each other. The teachers also talked about

how they facilitated imaginative opportunities in outside play. This was described by four

teachers and exemplified by Participant 8.

> *We play outside that we are going to Disney World. We are all in
> the car and oops, we hit a pothole. We are honking at things in the
> road, like a cow in the road and we pretend to get out of the car to
> move things like alligators in the road (8).*

Another teacher described how she created a grocery store for them in the House

Center. One play scheme

> *we did was the grocery store. It might have been part of the theme
> Growing Things and fruits and vegetables. We took the stuff out of
> the refrigerator and we had a little basket. We sat together and
> picked an item to put on the grocery list and then they went and
> picked out the item. It was amazing because I have some children
> who are still working on just basic labeling. Some of them can
> point out the apple, but at least one couldn't tell you it was an
> apple even though he eats an apple every day. So, it was really
> neat to see that. Someone would be the cashier and someone would
> be the bagger. So everyone would have a job. Someone was the
> greeter. You have to have a job for everybody. The scenario was
> set up (7).*

The classroom curriculum is theme based created for typically developing four year

old children. Teachers can follow the sequence of themes or differentiate to

accommodate their young learners. They can also determine the length of time to be

spent on a particular theme depending on the abilities of the children. Most of the

teachers spend two weeks on a theme while some may expand to three weeks if the need

and interests of the children necessitates it.

Participant 7 described another theme that she only recently developed.

> *Last year was the first time I ever did that theme* (Real and Make
> Believe) *because I wasn't sure if it was too abstract for the
> students. They loved it! We are doing it again this year. We have a
> pile of mismatched clothes and costumes that we use in different
> ways. A lacy thing could be a princess or a fairy or whatever.
> Right now, kids are choosing their own scenarios. Within that,
> some still need support or modeling where you give them
> suggestions on what they could say or what they could do. But
> others take the lead. We had a baseball player take a fairy princess
> to the baseball field. They all wanted to play baseball. We had the
> imaginary ball and I pitched it and they had fun. Some had never
> played baseball. So we got other vocabulary in that we weren't
> even planning on. They were cheering for the other students when
> they were running (7).*

One participant described how she worked with the speech pathologist and

another teacher colleague to teach a Community Helper theme in small group and then in

a play scheme. The adults structured an interactive lesson in which one child was hidden

behind a curtain dressed as a community helper. While the child was dressing, the speech

pathologist conducted a playful exchange of questions with the children in the audience

directed to the hidden child.

> *When we were doing community workers and we left all the
> costumes out, C* (teacher colleague) *said he had never seen the
> children use the costumes before the dress up thing. I expanded the
> theme to two weeks. I guess because what we structured in the
> learning in small group they could take back to their play in
> centers. They know now that the policeman carries the flashlight
> and he can use it to look under the house for a kitty cat and they
> can use that knowledge for play. All the children were dressed in
> the costumes and using the tools. One was dressed as a
> construction worker and was measuring all the shelves in the
> classroom. They have never used the costumes like this. It has
> opened up their play. That is what I am hoping in Traditional
> Tales will happen. I have bought houses that you can draw and
> paint on. I bought houses for the Three Little Pigs and then we will
> do travel and Transportation next and we can put the houses
> outside and they can make a little city and they can drive the
> tricycles in and out. We are going to see again if by opening it up*

in small group in a structured setting and then leaving it there, do
they use it more thoroughly? More purposefully? Maybe before
they would have just put the clothes on and not used the language
and not known what they were dressing up as? That's why I think
we need two if not three weeks on some of the themes (2).

Typical Peers

Typical peers also emerged as a theme from the data with Interview Question Nine.

Four of the teachers regularly included typical peers in their classrooms. Typical peers

are typically developing prekindergarten children who have been invited to participate in

the special education classroom. In these settings, there may be one or two typical peers

in the classroom. The participants believed that the addition of typical peers who served

as models and playmates were invaluable to the skill development of the children with

special needs.

> *I love that I don't have to direct the play; the typical peers who are*
> *the older 4 and 5 year olds can model and direct the play (2). I*
> *think they (typical peers) help a lot. Their play skills are on a*
> *higher level and they bring in that component where children do*
> *want to be like the other kids. So the typical peers provide that role*
> *model to look at, interact with and do things together (7).*

One participant stated that she thought the typical peers could interact with the

children in ways that the adults could not. She described one particular instance in which

she was trying to get the children to play together but was not successful. The typical

peer took over.

> *She didn't give up. She looked at me and winked. She knew exactly*
> *what she was doing. She drove the police car and the little guy*
> *with Autism hollered, "She's not doing it right. I don't want her to*
> *do it that way." I said, "No, she can do it that way."I let her keep*
> *going and she got him to acquiesce. He said, "Oh, alright."She*
> *looked over and smiled and went right on. She got into his play*
> *and helped him make some different choices and think of things*
> *differently. She forced him to talk to her and interact with her. We*
> *had tried to get into his play but he would not allow it to happen.*

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At first, he did the same thing with her but he was more forgiving.
He acquiesced a lot sooner than he did with us (the adults) *(2).*

Accommodations

(Interview Question 11)

All participants stated that accommodations to support play in the classroom were

inherent in a classroom for children with special needs because every child required

accommodations to be successful. In that sense, accommodations are embedded across

the daily routine and a learned element of the special educator's practice. It may be that

accommodations are specialized instruction and special educators are trained to

accommodate different learning styles so what could be defined as an accommodation in

a general education setting is a regular part of the instruction in a pre-k special education

classroom.

Table 7: Accommodations to Support Play

Classroom wide	Individual
Clearly defined play spaces	1:1 instruction
Direct instruction in small and large group	Direct Instruction
Timer for clean up	Timer
Adult proximity	Materials specific to interest
Visual Supports	Embedded opportunities for eye contact
Open or Close Centers to structure choices	Embedded opportunities for toy manipulation
Solution Kit (PBS)	Individualized visual schedule
Choices	Choices
Tucker Turtle and other scripted stories (PBS)	Peer Facilitator/Friend

One participant's response embodies the essence of the others' thoughts about accommodations and their students.

> *Because every child is special needs it is hard to be specific, but I still have to be child specific in enticing a child to play and to keep his/her engagement, so I must find the right toy to capture the child's interest to develop that joint attention—don't really think about specific accommodations. You think about them* (the children) *as just them-who they are (1).*

While all stated that accommodations were a regular part of the instruction, they did name some strategies that they consistently used to support play as a developmentally appropriate practice. These included one on one attention to children who were more delayed in order to increase their attention spans, direct instruction and visual supports to make Centers' choices, adult proximity and instruction to initiate or facilitate play, timers to help learn completion and clean-up, careful environmental arrangement that clearly defines the play spaces and visual supports to facilitate and enhance communication. The participants thought that their children required direct instruction on choice making to help build their repertoire of activities and on how to play with particular toys or materials. Many children with disabilities have limited interests so the teachers felt it was important to identify those interests and then try to expand on them in order to increase and improve the child's play skills.

> *The longer I teach I have learned that I have to take what their interest is and spread it. I have a little boy who likes letters. So I put magnetic letters all over the room. It worked (6).*

All teachers described ways of rotating centers or structuring centers that promoted social interaction.

> *I will alternate which center I will close, depends on the number of children who come to school, just so I can increase the likelihood of social interaction. That way, it is still their choice but I am still trying to provide the opportunity for interaction. I see that as an accommodation (8).*

All of the participants had training in Positive Behavior Support (PBS) through the Center on Social Emotional Foundation of Early Learning (CSEFEL). Each of them cited the use of the various PBS strategies for problem solving, social skills and language development.

Research Question Three

What do Early Childhood Special Educators believe about the role of the adult in play?

Table 8 Role of the Adult: Summary of Research Question 3 (Interview Question 10)

Role	# of Participants
Vital to developmentally appropriate practice; changes according to individual needs; develop and prepare variety of activities	8
Teach problem solving; collaborator with other professionals	2
Direct instruction	3
Facilitator	4
Observer	5

This research question was addressed in Interview Question Ten. All of the participants talked about the vital role the adult had in play as a developmentally appropriate practice. For each of them, the role was multi-layered, complex and demanding in the sense that the adult could have many roles within play and across the daily routine of the school day.

> *The adult's role is to think of activities that are engaging and developmentally appropriate, that means the activity needs to span ages 17 months to 5 years, which can be very challenging (1).*

The adult may directly teach how to use materials and how to play, may facilitate, scaffold, model, support and expand the play. One participant described how the adult role changed depending on the needs of the classroom.

> *Our role (*the two adults*) changes depending on what is happening in the classroom. Some days I may observe and sit between centers to take notes. It is important to watch what they do in order to see what they really know (2).*

The adult may also teach problem solving and then facilitate the process for children in Centers to help them practice the skill. Another participant talked about the transformation of her students from parallel players to collaborative players. Her role changed from specifically teaching how to play to facilitating the play between peers.

> *My role now is a supporter of finding solutions for things. Helping find words, keeping the freak out down if somebody took your toy and you are new to the process of finding solutions and using your words and supporting those things to enable the play because if we cannot work through that stuff then our play is not going to grow too (5).*

All participants stated that the adult needed to be aware of individual strengths and needs as well as developmental levels. They also stated that the adult role changes

over the year as the children's skills develop and that teachers should be sensitive to the

evolving abilities and interests of the child. This is illustrated by teacher 6:

> *The best teaching time is when you follow their lead, you instruct*
> *and some of it is yes, direct instruction, when they are in that dump*
> *and fill stage and you want to move them on to the next level.*
> *That's your opportunity to say, oh look what else we can do or we*
> *can do this next. Let's think, let's add some friends and then it is*
> *social and you are building their social, friendship skills. I was*
> *watching it yesterday and I was going to go over and join in but I*
> *thought, you know what, they don't need me. That was a good*
> *feeling. I am so proud of them. That is exactly how it should be. By*
> *the end of the year it should be more child initiated and always*
> *that we follow their lead. I mean that is important. That we follow*
> *their lead and it is focused around their interests and what they*
> *want to do and I honor that and try to respect it and maybe add to*
> *it (6).*

Most of the participants acknowledged that sometimes it was best practice for the

adults to just watch. The children are capable of playing together, interacting,

communicating, and problem solving.

> *As adults, we think we have to be in charge of it, of everything and*
> *we have to direct it but once we let that go, we have so much more*
> *to learn. We don't have to be the boss of all that (4).*

Another participant described the evolution of her relationship with the speech

pathologist and how together they worked together to support play in the classroom.

> *In the past, my speech therapist and I would work together. We*
> *always had our small groups and we would rotate, one to me, one*
> *to her and one to the paraprofessional. We are all working on the*
> *same theme. We have seen great growth with language. But I had*
> *not seen the growth in a social context. For instance we did the zoo*
> *last year and they had not seen a monkey so we put one in house*
> *and they just snatched the monkey right out of the other child's*
> *hand. So this year we did what we called social communication*
> *centers. At Center time, the speech therapist is in there with us.*
> *One center she has, one center I have, and one center the*
> *paraprofessional has. We are focusing on making the children*
> *interact and talk to each other so you are still getting the*
> *vocabulary from the themes in our curriculum and you are upping*

the ante because you are making them talk to one another. In the beginning, you could just get them to talk to you, sometimes just one word, but now we are at a point where they are talking to each other and working things out. By doing that it kind of shows how everything becomes integrated because she (speech therapist) *has known about our behavior system. She knows about the Solution Kit (Positive Behavior Support, PBS strategy). The speech therapist will say go get the Solution Kit and it is neat to see them grab and bring it over and they are using their communication skills whether verbally or nonverbally to solve a problem that is going on but they are not constantly seeking the help of an adult. It is just amazing to see the growth and how well they play together when in the beginning when we just had them play which is what we did to see how they interacted, they chose to do parallel or isolated play where they weren't even watching the other child was doing. It is really beautiful! It really is! We have been looking at the vocabulary scores and they are still making the gains so it is not like in isolation where we are playing this game and we are focusing on insects is our upcoming theme so this is spider. Instead we are using the bugs and we are interacting and we are going to make them go in the water and climb up the spout and that kind of stuff so the kids are incorporating all of it and working with each other and then when a problem comes up and you add that third component to play which is problem solving, like I said everything is all inter-related or inter-connected. We are doing more things together. We just keep bouncing (*ideas*) off of each other (7).*

Participant 2 described how she developed a planning sheet for the children to plan their play with her or another adult and then how she facilitated the plan in the chosen play center.

*I have planning sheets. It has a big housekeeping symbol and it says I want to play and then it will say dress up, wash clothes, go shopping, babysit, I will need … The sheet has a slew of Boardmaker pictures underneath. They go below and if they (*the children*) chose dress up, they will choose clothes, hats, and maybe the telephone because I have to call somebody. Then they have a plan and they have a better idea of what they need to do in order to accomplish their plan. I decided I should only do it for Housekeeping, Blocks, Art. Because they, (*the children*) don't know what to do. Then my SLP and my assistant can each go to a center and I can go to a center and then we can support them in carrying out their plans. I even thought whoever goes to Housekeeping we all work together to create a plan with the plan sheet. See if we can*

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have a more cohesive sharing of ideas as opposed to three
*different ideas and then it is hard for them (*to play together) *(2).*

Research Question Four

What, if any, are the barriers to play as a developmentally appropriate practice in Early

Childhood Special Education classrooms?

Table 9 Barriers to Play: Summary of Research Question 4 (Interview Question 12)

Barriers	Time; Class size; Adult skill level and number; Curricular changes in pre-k and kindergarten; Stress that children be prepared; Parents and other professionals don't understand importance of play	Lack of outdoor materials	Room size; Level of individual need of children; Limited inclusive opportunities; Dichotomy of practices between preschool and kindergarten	Standardized testing; fear of stigma if children not prepared for kindergarten
# of Participants	8	2	1	4

This research question was addressed in Interview Question Twelve. All of the

participants cited time as a barrier to the full implementation of play as a developmentally

practice. The constraints of the school schedule with mandatory elements such as meals

impacts how much time can be spent in play in the classroom. One participant described

her difficulty with finding enough time for the children to plan, play and then review their

play.

I struggle with the time piece a lot. I wish I had a full hour and
time to do review. (after play) *I would help them to review (2).*

All participants stated they wanted more time for Centers in the school day but

felt that they had to cut Centers short some days or not have them at all depending on the

prescribed school schedule or if another event precluded having the time for Centers.

Interestingly, one teacher remarked on the need for the ability to balance time with the

developmental constraints of the children.

> *Sometimes, going one minute too long can lead to disaster. I think*
> *the biggest obstacle is to figure out the right amount of time for the*
> *right day and the right situation. They are so actively engaged and*
> *all of the sudden you find that you have allowed it to go on for two*
> *minutes too long and toys are flying and everybody is crying (1).*

Other barriers included the lack of or inappropriate outdoor materials, class size,

and the actual physical space of the classroom.

> *A bigger classroom would help because square footage wise that*
> *would give more opportunities to bring in more materials and*
> *rotate more materials in and out of Centers to keep them fresh and*
> *to keep the kids engaged (3)*

. Two participants noted the difficulty of transporting, storing or even having

materials for the playground. Another barrier is

> *the lack of materials to interact with on the playground. I try to*
> *rotate materials but not always successfully, then the children get*
> *bored and the play becomes inappropriate (1).*

Play is difficult to facilitate because there are *inappropriate and inadequate*

outside materials used by too many children (6).

All of the participants stated that class size and insufficient adult support also

impacted play. Class size increases as the school year progresses because children are

eligible to enter on their third birthday. Some of the classes can grow to eighteen children

and three adults. One teacher described the difficulties inherent in an ever growing class

population.

> *We have children with very specific needs and some people that*
> *need more support and that is harder to do when you are just*
> *trying to keep everybody safe and everybody is where they need to*
> *be (4).*

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All teachers felt that the barriers were not only in the number of available adults but in the limited skill level of the adults. They stated that the adults need to be able to facilitate language and support all of the elements of play. From the teachers' interviews, it is apparent that it is important that the adults in the classroom need to know and understand the developmental levels of the children in order to support them. One participant described the frustration she feels in her efforts to teach effectively all of her students.

> *The level of need is just so great that you cannot adequately*
> *support the children in Centers. It just becomes very challenging.*
> *When you want to sit down and help somebody here, you have*
> *three other people in that center that you have to support and if*
> *somebody is having a real difficulty then you have to go to the*
> *immediate problem (5).*

The adults need to know how and when to model, scaffold and intervene, if necessary.

Four participants identified barriers such as standardized testing in other parts of the school that require quiet in the pre-k classrooms and on the playground. Occasionally, the children's therapy schedule is impacted by standardized testing. Some mentioned the newly required standardized testing for their students that impacts both instructional and play time. One participant cited limited inclusive opportunities as a barrier. Participant 7 thought the only barriers at her school were *the barriers the children have on themselves; their personal limits that we are trying to push (7).*

The barriers most often cited by all participants were curricular changes in kindergarten and adult attitudes and beliefs about play as a developmentally appropriate practice. Four of the participants specifically stated that prekindergarten teachers are

afraid they will be stigmatized if they send their students to kindergarten without

knowing all of their letters and sounds. One participant stated that

> *the crisis in Early Childhood Education over the last five years is that we have put play on the back burner and we have emphasized letters and numbers first. I understand as a teacher the importance of that. But, I think that because you are introducing things before they are developmentally ready for them, then in third grade, that crucial year, they are struggling because you did not let them play, you did not honor their way of learning (6)*

The participants talked about the stress they feel to meet their students'

developmental needs and at the same time make sure they are ready for kindergarten.

They described kindergarten as the new first grade and the implications that had on

kindergarteners and their students who have developmental delays. They worry that these

children have not had the necessary play opportunities to be successful in school.

Particularly, the students who are identified as at risk as they start kindergarten.

Participant 5 wondered;

> *what will happen to all those kids who didn't have the exposure and the opportunities or that didn't have homes that were full of toys and experiences with real objects (5)?*

One participant described her own philosophical struggle with the dichotomy of

practices in prekindergarten and kindergarten.

> *I think the real problem comes in when these little people have been able to guide their own learning in pre-k but then when they get to kindergarten, they are automatically from day one told to sit down at a table and wait for a teacher's directions. I think our little people that go to kindergarten, it is hard for them to understand that the freedoms that they had in pre-k are not necessarily the freedoms in learning that they will have in kindergarten because the day is more structured, the expectations are high and there is not a lot of time for movement and breaks for children. When you look at the equipment that is in a kindergarten today, the House Center is very pitiful. It might consist of a table and two chairs, a stove and a fridge, maybe some babies. Not a lot*

*of props or costumes. The block area may have one type of
building block. There are not a lot of opportunities for role playing
or clothing and accessories for the kids to dress up in. Even when
they are talking about social-emotional skills, I don't think the kids
have a daily opportunity to role play these skills before they
actually have to go and apply them (3).*

All of the participants felt that both parents and other professionals did not grasp

the importance of play as a developmentally appropriate practice in school.

*They may not be as aware as they should be about the importance
of play and that play can drive the curriculum. It is the daily
classroom routine! Integrate play and learning thematically and
the children thrive (6).*

All participants thought there should be more opportunities for play in the school

day for children in the primary grades. They felt that the removal of Centers in

kindergarten and limited opportunities for play negatively impacts all children.

*I think the biggest disservice we have done to kids is to take away
the hour of Center Time because I think they are even more ready
than preschoolers to develop play and to use object substitution
which enhances imagination and creativity(2).*

All participants report an awareness of the curricular changes and expectations

and the impact it has on their instructional practice.

*In Pre-K, I think we are still doing a good job of it, but I also feel
the pressure of doing more and more academic work as opposed to
play (5).*

Another participant stated,

teachers (in general) *are afraid to incorporate play because they
will have a bad reputation of sending kids to kindergarten who
don't know all of their ABCs or sounds. Teachers are afraid and
don't know how much can be learned through play (1).*

One participant shared her thoughts on kindergarten expectations and the

perceived attitude toward her children with special needs.

In Kindergarten, I think they are having such a disservice, losing the centers and the plays skills there and the socialization. It is creating more and more behavioral issues especially in boys is what I am reading. They have the hardest time because they don't have any time to have that free train of thought. Everything is thought out, planned for them all day long. NO time to be a kid. To me, kindergarten is more like first grade, now. The things that they are expecting them to do, I am just like, really? Is that developmentally appropriate? Writing sentences? Drawing a picture and writing two sentences about it? In kindergarten? I think that is the pressure. You have these kids from us (special education classes) *coming in and you feel that a lot, although they don't ever say it to me, they don't want my kids coming into their class (8).*

Research Question Five

What supports would enable Early Childhood Special Educators to implement play more fully as a developmentally appropriate practice?

Table 10: Supports for Play: Summary Table: Research Question 5 (Interview Question 13)

Supports	Increased Adult Assistance (number and skill level); increased opportunities for teachers to enhance own skills; more time	Smaller class size	Play focused trainings
# of Participants	8	7	5

This research question was addressed in Interview Question Thirteen. The responses to this question paralleled the responses to Research Question 4 about the barriers to play. All of the teachers stated that more adult assistance (in number and skill) would be a tremendous support. One participant described a routine occurrence in the classroom.

Even though there are two of us there could be three or four areas
where kids are playing and I might sit reading a really good book
with someone and my aide is with someone else and over in
Housekeeping I'll hear someone screaming. I'm sorry I'll be right
back. You have to leave that situation and attend to the more
immediate fire (1).

Another participant valued the expertise and assistance of the other professional who support the children.

I would like the SLP (Speech Language Pathologist) *to do 2 days a*
week instead of one in Centers. I think we need the adult piece to
move play forward (2).

All participants talked about how much more adult assistance is needed to help the children and to manage the materials in a class of children with special needs. Adults are needed to help children follow through across all developmental domains as well as to support their play. Smaller class size was also cited as a necessary support by seven participants. One participant described the difficulty surrounding all children having an opportunity to describe and listen to each others' play plans.

As classes get larger, it becomes more difficult to manage all
elements. We want kids to hear each others' plans but it is a lot of
waiting while everyone plans (for play) *(4).*

Smaller class size would allow for more individualization of play skills.

You could devote a lot more time and really develop people's
skills fully and I think move them along quicker if you had smaller
class sizes (5).

One participant suggested the additional adult support be provided at the beginning of the school year when the experience of school is so new to the majority of children in the classroom.

It would be great to have more help in here to facilitate the
beginning process of play and the interaction, communication and
social skills and then fade their assistance away. Once you have

these things, this starts the foundation for academics. The best way for these children to learn, I have found, is through play. Play helps to stimulate my brain. It is hard for me to let go of my guard. Somewhere along the way we forget to play. So my being in there I get to relive my childhood and it makes me a happier person because of it (7).

Five participants talked about the need for play focused trainings for teachers and assistants working in the classrooms. For these participants, continuing to add to their own knowledge base and improve their skills as well as the skills of other adults who worked with the children was an important element of their instructional practice. One of the participants articulated the desire to have very specific training that would help to develop a shared understanding of play among teachers, other professionals and parents.

Defining play, so everyone has a common language for play, so you can educate your school on play and the techniques in having real world practice and have someone coach you to make sure you are doing it appropriately and benefitting your kids (3).

All participants described the desire to have more opportunities to enhance their own skills.

I think I should work on my own skills. Definitely in terms of making sure that I am challenging the students who need to be challenged and making sure that I am keeping things novel and fresh as the whole year goes on. . It is just more the skills and the time to really reflect on where they are and am I meeting them at their level and am I really taking the time to think about are they where they need to be and how am I going to get them there (6).

Summary of Findings

In review, the findings of this study offer an insight into Early Childhood Special Educators' beliefs about play as a developmentally appropriate practice within the context of their individual classrooms and their own educational experiences. The teacher

participants stated that play is integral to the development of young children with special needs and that play as a developmentally appropriate practice is the foundation for instruction in their classrooms. The participants suggested that play promotes learning across all developmental domains: cognitive, communication, social-emotional, physical, and adaptive. All of the participants discussed that children build language skills, imitate adult roles as practice for the future, manipulate objects and materials, problem solve and use their imaginations to create fantasies that help them make sense of their world through play. Play was described as fun, interactive, social, creative, imaginative and active engagement with materials or persons.

Themes emerged from the interview questions that were correlated with the research questions. These themes included: typical peers, disability, play schemas or scenarios, change in play over time (the school year), curricular changes that impact play, toys or materials, other professionals' responses to pre-kindergarten special education and play, and professional development.

The Early Childhood Special Educators cited their own formal education, on the job training and continuous professional development through trainings and readings as factors that influenced their beliefs about play as a developmentally appropriate practice. All of them sought opportunities to learn more about play and to reflect on play as a practice in their classrooms.

The participants described how play was implemented in their classrooms in the context of the school day. All of them stated a desire for more time for play in the classroom. Barriers to play that were discussed included time, class size, physical structure of the classroom, curricular changes and expectations, other professional and

parental attitudes about play, and standardized testing. Supports that would enhance play were highlighted as more time, smaller class size, more knowledgeable adults who could work individually or in small groups with the children and increased professional development opportunities and play focused trainings.

    The next chapter discusses the findings in relation to and the implications for future research and practice.

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to learn about Early Childhood Special Educators'

beliefs/perceptions about play in their classrooms in light of the documented changes in

curricular, assessment and performance expectations for all children entering

kindergarten. Play and developmentally appropriate practices in pre-kindergartens have

been the topic of many studies over the last three decades (Bray & Cooper, 2007; Provost

& LaFreniere, 1991; Rubin, Watson & Jambor, 1978; Saracho and Spodek, ed., 1998).

Few have focused on the play of children with special needs (Barton & Wolery, 2008;

Tao, Odom, Buysse, Skinner, West & Vitztum-Komanecki, 2008; Westby, 1988). No

studies that examined the play beliefs of Early Childhood Special Educators were

identified.

The research questions that guided this study are:

1. What are Early Childhood Special Educators beliefs/perspectives on play as a
   developmentally appropriate practice in their classrooms and what factors
   influence those beliefs?

2. In what ways is play implemented in the classroom?

3. What do Early Childhood Special Educators believe about the role of the adult in
   play?

4. What, if any, are the barriers to play as a developmentally appropriate practice in
   Early Childhood Special Education classrooms?

5. What supports would enable Early Childhood Special Educators to implement play more fully as a developmentally appropriate practice?

The study was undertaken because of recent research on trends in educational practices and changes in societal expectations for children (Ginsberg, 2007; Miller & Almon, 2009; Hirsh-Pasek, et al., 2009). Despite the solid foundation of Early Childhood Education and Early Childhood Special Education and the emphasis on play as a developmentally appropriate practice at the university level, researchers were writing about and documenting the effects of standardized testing, push down academics and the apparent loss of play on children (Grau, 2009; Miller & Almon, 2009; Zigler, Singer, Bishop-Josef, 2004; Fisher et al., 2008). If there were concerns for children who are typically developing, certainly there should be more concerns and implications for young children with disabilities. There appeared to be a disconnect between theory and practice. At the university, developmentally appropriate practice is the pre-eminent pedagogical approach to the education of young children but the recent literature and personal observations revealed that more direct instruction techniques were being used, play opportunities at school were diminishing or had disappeared, and it appeared more time was spent on standardized tests and pencil and paper tasks for even the youngest children (Ginsberg, 2007; Miller & Almon, 2009; Hirsh-Pasek, et al., 2009).

It was important to ask teachers of young children with special needs what they believed and experienced about play as a developmentally appropriate practice because it appeared their voices had not been heard concerning the curricular shifts and increased attention to standardized testing. Were they concerned about their students? Did they feel pressures to emphasize academics and testing? The literature had revealed no information

on Early Childhood Special Educators' beliefs about play. This study sought to add to the knowledge base by interviewing experienced, accomplished teachers who would share their beliefs and stories of practice of play in prekindergarten classrooms for children with special needs.

Each of the teacher participants readily engaged in the interview process. The interview provided the uninterrupted time to talk about and discuss their beliefs in a mutual conversation with the researcher. They appeared to revel in the opportunity to share their stories whether they were offering thoughtful reflections about their practice or telling humorous anecdotes about the young children they taught. Their passion for their profession was evident as they told the narrative of their lived lives as teachers who spend up to ten hours a day at school almost seven hours of which is with young children with special needs. The participants' enthusiasm for their work was evident throughout each interview/conversation and was captured in the field notes and on tape. As the interviews were transcribed, I underscored sections where the participant had been particularly descriptive and passionate. After each interview, I wrote my thoughts about the experience to keep each one separate and unique. This helped to keep each narrative fresh and original and to minimize confusion concerning attribution of any participant's statements.

My relationship with the participants enhanced the interview process because we already had professional interactions as resource teacher and teachers, but we had not had individual opportunities to discuss deeply our thoughts about play as a developmentally appropriate practice. Connelly and Clandinin, (1990) describe the importance of feelings of connectedness and equality between the researcher and participant. Ezzy (2010)

discusses the emotional aspects of interviewing as a performance between the interviewer and the interviewee which results in mutual understanding and an exchange of ideas: a communion of exploration, discovery and reflection. He contends that the emotional connection between the two enhances the interview process. Because we had an extant relationship, the participants were comfortable to share their beliefs and perceptions which provided for richer, thicker description of their own narratives which were woven together for this study.

The findings reveal that Early Childhood Special Educators' believe in play as a developmentally appropriate practice and state that play is foundational to their practice in prekindergarten classrooms for children with special needs. This is important because it reveals that Early Childhood Special Educators embrace the philosophical approach of Early Childhood Educators in the goal of teaching the whole child from a developmentally appropriate stance.

This chapter discusses the other findings of the study by research question. The participants' responses to each research question are synthesized to provide a clear picture of their collective narrative regarding play as a developmentally appropriate practice. Also included in the chapter are a discussion of the limitations and implications for future research and practice.

Research Question One

Early Childhood Special Educators' Beliefs about Play

All of the participants stated that they believed play was the foundation for learning in their classrooms and they centered their instructional practice on play

opportunities. Their stated beliefs matched those of highly educated Early Childhood Educators' cited in the literature (McMullen & Alat, 2002). They purposefully planned for play in their instruction and it was an integral part of the school day. All of the participants stated that the provision of play was what made learning meaningful to children and that play in which a child is purposeful and engaged influences the development of social skills, fine and gross motor skills, cognitive skills as well as provides problem solving opportunities. These stated beliefs concurred with the pedagogical stances of NAEYC and DEC and the child development theories of Vygotsky (2002) and Piaget (1962). Most of the participants had some general knowledge of categories of play as delineated by Parten (1932) and two could recall some formal instruction in play at the undergraduate level. All of the participants stated that they accessed professional readings and trainings to keep them abreast of developmentally appropriate practices.

For them, there was not a philosophical disconnect between theory and practice as identified in the literature (Miller & Almon, 2009; Graue, 2009; Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, & Gryfe, 2008). The participants were aware of the changes in educational trends because of reading professional journal articles and books, but stated that their beliefs about play were not adversely affected by these trends. In fact, most said that their increased knowledge about play through professional development was a basis for expanding play opportunities in their classrooms. The participants stated that their teaching practice was more likely impacted by the practical limitations and every day realities of being a teacher in a large school district. Their instructional practice was defined by the demands of time, space, numbers of children, and availability of skilled

adults rather than a change in what they believed was appropriate for young children. They felt the pressures/tension of the changes that were affecting kindergarten students but stated that they adhered strongly to their knowledge and beliefs of play as a developmentally appropriate practice for young children with special needs. Their instructional approach mirrored the school district's Pre-K Special Education program's policy towards developmentally appropriate practice of play in the classroom.

The conundrum here is that this philosophical disconnect has been identified and documented (Almon, 2004; Miller & Almon, 2009; Zigler, Singer, Bishop-Josef, 2004; Fisher et al., 2008). Curricular changes, increased academic demands, more standardized testing are more and more evident in the landscape of Early Childhood Education (Adcock & Patton, 2001; Giovacco-Johnson, Lava & Recchia, 2004). But, the teachers in this study stated that they believed they were implementing play as a developmentally appropriate practice despite their awareness of these pressures and changes. The beliefs about their practice stated by these highly educated and experienced teacher participants are confirmed by research that identified teacher's level of education as a factor in the implementation of developmentally appropriate practices (McMullen & Alat, 2002).

Future research could examine the factors that allow teachers to practice according to their combined pedagogical knowledge and espoused beliefs according to theories of child development. Logue & Harvey (2010) found that coursework in Early Childhood Education was another factor that influenced teachers' beliefs in developmentally appropriate practice. The teachers in this study had not had Early Childhood Education coursework at the undergraduate level but had continued their

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acquisition of knowledge about young children and play through professional readings, trainings, affiliations and as they called it, "on the job training".

One group of researchers who studied educators' beliefs revealed that pre-kindergarten and kindergarten teachers may have different beliefs about the role of play and school readiness (Cinisomo, Fuligni, Ritchie, Howes & Karoly, 2008). Some of the participants discussed the differences in beliefs about expectations of school readiness for preschool age children with special needs. They stated that they were aware of the kindergarten teachers' expectations for kindergarten and felt some discomfort about the transition to kindergarten for their students; this did not prevent them from the use of play as a developmentally appropriate practice to teach the young learners in their classrooms.

Research Question Two

Implementation of Play

The teacher participants discussed the types and amount of play that were implemented daily in their classrooms. They stated that they observed different types of play as described by Parton (1932) and Smilansky (1968). All of the participants talked about their awareness of the different developmental levels of play enacted by their students as theorized by Piaget (1962). While they were not necessarily able to apply formal names to the categories of play, they shared their understanding of what they saw individual children do with play over the course of the school year. They also emphasized how the children's play skills evolve over the year as they learn and develop.

Planned instruction centered on play as a developmentally appropriate practice and the teachers discussed how their beliefs impacted the implementation of play. As

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they reflected on their daily routine, they considered ways to increase the amount of play as well as to improve the quality of playful interactions throughout the school day. Play was implemented through structured and unstructured activities using play scenarios, thematic learning centers, accommodations and in some cases, typical peers, to enhance motor development, to promote social interaction, to improve cognitive skills as well as to provide opportunities for joyful fun.

Earlier studies had identified other professionals such as psychologists and social workers as the primary instructors of pretend play skills in young children (Barton & Wolery, 2008). In a more recent study, Barton and Wolery (2010) stated that teachers can be effective teachers of pretend play skills in young children with proper training to implement the instruction with fidelity. The participants in this study discussed how they use their knowledge, experience and understanding of their individual students to create play scenarios to teach pretend play. Their planned instruction of play is documented in their lesson plans and they spoke of the progress the children made when the skills were taught to them.

The participants' narratives also affirm what other researchers have found about the use of play to build social skills through interactions with typically developing peers (Bray & Cooper, 2007; Coolahan, Fantuzzo, Mendez & McDermott, 2000). Typically developing peers were included in a number of the classrooms and the participants stated that they sought opportunities for their children to interact with other typically developing children in the school. The participants recognized the value of quality interactions between children with and without disabilities. One participant

acknowledged that one of the typically developing children in her class could do more to

extend and enhance play than she could. Another participant said,

> *That's where typical peers are great. You get those older 4s and 5s*
> *who can model and direct the play. And also, especially for those*
> *kids on the spectrum who need that social modeling to come from*
> *another child; some children are going to be more drawn to*
> *another child rather than an adult (6).*

The power of peers and play with children with special needs is another avenue of

research to pursue in depth with other experienced Early Childhood Special Educators.

Although no specific studies about the amount of time devoted to play were

identified in the literature other than the Miller & Almon (2009) study, all of the

participants expressed concern that not enough time could be allotted for play regularly in

their classrooms. They clearly indicated their wish that the school day be more flexible in

order to provide more opportunities for play.

Research Question Three

Role of the Adult

The adult role in play was of vital importance and interest to the participants.

Their stated beliefs underscored the literature about the impact of the adult on play

(Ashiabi, 2005; Barton & Wolery, 2010: Trawick-Smith & Dziurgot, 2010). They

believed that their facilitation and direction in play helped to increase their students'

developmental skills particularly in the areas of social interaction, independence and

problem solving. The data revealed that the participants thought that they were

facilitating high quality play in their classrooms. The stated beliefs of these experienced

educators confirms Trawick-Smith & Dziurgot's (2010) finding that there is a link

between a teacher's education and experience and the quality of play facilitation.

In their quest to improve children's skills and enhance their learning, the

participant teachers discussed how they continually sought ways to facilitate play to meet

the children's developmental levels. They talked about the need to know and understand

individual children in order to best assist them in their play and to provide them with

opportunities to interact with their environment (Mastrangelo, 2009). The participants

also acknowledged how the children's play skills change over time and how the teacher

must be reflexive and responsive to each child's individual strengths and needs as they

plan for instruction and embed skill building opportunities in the play (Barton & Wolery,

2008). For example, one teacher described how her role changed over the course of the

school year.

> *You do have more support at the beginning for the kids and then*
> *we try to fade support as quickly as possible because as soon as we*
> *see you begin to initiate on your own then we are fading out*
> (support) *(5).*

Another teacher noted the change as well as how a mixed age grouping could

also facilitate play.

> *I see the type of support change because in the beginning, it is a*
> *lot of figuring out how things work and modeling and working*
> *together but now I am finding as we are working in Centers, the*
> *kids don't need me as much for that. They are doing that for each*
> *other. I have a five year old who was 5 in September and I have my*
> *little baby threes. Well, he can do that for them. They don't need*
> *me for that (4).*

The quality of the play in terms of how children used the materials changed over the school year as well. One teacher described the transformation of toy play in her classroom.

> *The complexity of the play has increased. It has gone from simple manipulation of the toys to where and how you put out toys. And now they really have a problem because they are playing together and they get stuck on something and you can help them solve the issue. My assistant and I find ourselves helping the play to progress by supporting the social side of it (4).*

Another participant stated that she needed to explicitly teach how to use the materials and she notes that some children do not yet have a basic understanding of many of the toys and manipulatives in the classroom.

> *At the very beginning of the year, we had centers we were just showing them how to play with materials and how to clean up, you know, the whole procedure process, they were not interacting at all and a lot were not even using the materials the way they were intended to be used or with creativity. Some children would just pick up the Legos and stare at them (7).*

The teachers described themselves and the other adults who worked in the classroom as play initiators, play facilitators, play supporters, play problem solvers, play observers, coaches and cheerleaders. One participant described the fluidity and complexity of her role as she plans to meet the developmental needs of her students.

> *I am trying to think of activities that will engage children from 17-18 months all the way to age 5 to get them to join in play. I need to make sure I have the right materials out in all my centers. I noticed nobody is going over here…I need to put some other things in there that will entice them , that will be more engaging to them and I think with our population you have to show how you do play and how you problem solve when there is a problem during play time. I think our role too is really scaffolding. They are doing one thing and I am going to up the ante a little and add something new to the mi x (1).*

While they understood the importance of the adult in the play of children with special needs, the participants also stated that they believed in child- initiated and child-independent play. Like Tsao, Odom, Buysse, Skinner, West & Viztum-Komanecki (2008), the participant teachers found that sometimes the children were more engaged when involved in child-directed activities of their own initiation. The participants struggled with how much facilitation should be offered and worried that they could be overly intrusive and structured. For them, it was a delicate balance of proffered supports (if necessary) and allowance for independent opportunities for play. This is another topic that should be examined in depth. Literature specific to how much or how little Early Childhood Special Educators facilitate play could not be identified.

Research Question Four

Barriers to Play

The identified barriers to play were outdoor space and materials, time, class size, physical structure of the classroom, the need for adult support, curricular changes and expectations, other professionals' and parental attitudes about the role of play in learning and standardized testing. The teachers described the myriad ways they address some of these barriers. All of them supplement their instruction with teacher purchased and or created materials for the classroom and the playground. The teacher participants develop trainings for parents to help them learn how to play with their children in addition to sending home newsletters and inviting them in for conferences. In all of these venues, they discuss the benefits of playful learning with parents. During periods of standardized testing, they adjust their curricular instruction to fit within the school testing schedule

with minimal negative effect on the children. The participants take a playful approach to the standardized testing that is now required of their students in an effort to get the best results without unduly stressing the children.

While the physical size and structure of the classroom was a barrier for only two of the participants, class size and need for adult support as barriers were cited by all of them. Class size as well as level of children's needs impact the amount of adult support that is necessary to facilitate learning in a prekindergarten classroom. One participant discussed how the number of children affects learning.

> *The sheer number of children is what makes it more difficult. We have children with very specific needs and some people that need more support (4).*

Another participant illustrated in words how she juggled the large class size in order to maximize learning but also be sure all children are safe.

> *If I have 14 people right now, 4 people in a center are safest. That means 4 centers open with 2 adults. You just can't do it. So one person needs to be making sure everybody is safe. So scanning so setting up the technology because everybody wants to use the computer and the interactive white board and listen to a story. All of that stuff you kind of have to help and then you have a sensory experience and you have to have someone monitoring the water and then have a social crisis going on and you have to have someone to support that. That is the part that is really hard for me. To have that many areas open without enough adults (5).*

The participants stated an awareness of current literature concerning the loss of play because they had participated in book studies and attended trainings on play as a developmentally appropriate practice. All of the participants took part in two book studies sponsored by the school district over two separate summers. The books examined were *Crisis in the Kindergarten* (Miller & Almon, 2009), and *Mandate for Playful Learning in Preschool* (Hirsh-Pasek, K., Golinkoff, R., Beck, L., & Singer, D., (2009).

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Three of the participants attended a professional development workshop specifically on play. One participant described her own particular path to knowledge about play and how to use it in the classroom.

> *The book study is what started it, <u>Crisis in the Kindergarten</u>   and then I read something after that and then read <u>Fantasy Play</u> and then I took a play workshop on the roots of literacy in play. That was really good. I went away with that stuff and I know I need more time for play. I try not to gyp that. And if anything now, I look at the clock and music comes before lunch and that keeps getting pushed back because this so important, especially if they are going really good and I can see it going along, I really try not to stop it (2).*

The findings show that for these teachers increased awareness of current literature had impacted their classrooms positively. Their awareness of play as a developmentally appropriate practice had been heightened through their own professional development and experiences. Two different participants talked about how their commitment to their chosen profession as special educators, their constant reflection on what works and doesn't work and their continuing journey to hone their skills to support young children with special needs keeps them focused on play as a developmentally appropriate practice in their classroom.

The data revealed their thoughts about curricular changes and expectations. All of the participants discussed the curricular changes in the kindergarten classrooms in their schools and the pressure they felt about their children transitioning to kindergarten. While they stated they were dismayed by these changes and expectations, their statements about their practices reflected that they continued to teach and to implement play as a developmentally appropriate practice because of their strong beliefs.

> *In Pre-K, I think we are still doing a good job of it but I also feel*
> *the pressure of doing more and more academic work as opposed to*
> *play. Free play I think of when I think of play in that manner. You*
> *can make academic activities playful, but then again it is so*
> *structured, is that really allowing them to use their imaginations*
> *and get into it (8).*

The data suggests that they are advocates for playful learning for all children but

especially for children with special needs. As advocates, they speak openly about their

knowledge of children and their instructional practices in the classroom and how they

will continue to use play as a developmentally appropriate practice to enhance children's

skills.

Research Question Five

Supports for Play

The supports for play mirrored the barriers to play. All of the barriers cited by the

participants were identified in ways that could turn them into supports if looked at from a

positive perspective. The supports declared necessary to enhance the implementation of

play include more time, more space, more materials, more skilled adult assistance and

smaller class size.

More adult assistance was the most frequently named necessary support. The

participants stated that the children would benefit from more adult facilitation in the

classroom. They discussed the need for more adult supports for interactive play, teaching

pretend play skills and problem solving. More adult support was identified as the need for

more para-professionals who could provide more generalized assistance as well as

professionals such as speech pathologist and occupational therapists that could provide

more individualized, specialized supports. One participant described how she learns from

other professionals who support the classroom.

> *I love it when my SLP* (speech language pathologist*) comes in*
> *during work time because I get an opportunity to watch her*
> *interact and you see a colleague interact with your kids and you*
> *get to listen to a conversation with kids. It is so eye opening*
> *because they will say things and interact in ways that you might*
> *not have thought to do. It is educational for me to see someone else*
> *use language with little people (3).*

This participant also expressed a desire for play coaches to come into the

classroom to model play skills to the adults working with the children.

Other named supports were time and smaller class size. The teacher participants

expressed a desire for more time to be allotted for play within the confines of the

structured school day. While confident in their expertise and knowledge about play and

young children with special needs, they still had to conform to the established school

routine. They stated that a smaller class size would allow for more individualized

attention to increase children's developmental skills which would lead to enhanced

pretend play skills, social interaction and problem solving as precursors to later academic

success.

While each teacher participant expressed confidence about her skills in the

classroom, they all conveyed a desire to know more about play and wished for more

opportunities for professional development to continue to hone their skills. One

participant summarized the thoughts of all.

> *We have had a lot of training and I think we do a lot of research on*
> *our own and a lot of reading of articles and making sure that we*
> *are up to date and current but I think we can always learn more*
> *and we love trainings. That would be the single biggest support I*
> *can point to (4)!*

Their desire for more professional development confirms the literature that stated teachers with more education and experience believe they implement play as a developmentally appropriate practice (McMullen & Alat, 2002; McMullen & et al., 2006; Trawick & Dziurgot, 2010). The participants also stated that they thought their paraprofessionals would benefit from training opportunities to learn about play as a developmentally appropriate practice.

Limitations

The sampling is limited to a group of teachers within a single school district for accessibility. The selected sampling may be seen as a limitation (Patton, 2002). While the study focuses on the individual perspectives of a small number of teachers, it begins the conversation about Early Childhood Special Educators' beliefs play as a developmentally appropriate practice for young children with special needs. Interviews with the selected sample provided in-depth analysis and richer understanding of how teachers' perceptions are actually translated into practice.

Hermeneutics, my own beliefs and biases about Early Childhood Special Education and play as a developmentally appropriate practice are other limitations. My beliefs structured the study and the research questions were developed from my understanding of the literature. The research questions and the subsequent interview questions grew from my desire to know more about Early Childhood Special Educators' beliefs about play as a developmentally appropriate practice.

My role as a resource teacher may be a limitation because the participants may have inhibited some responses to the interview questions even though their participation

in the study was outside of and away from their professional duties. Every effort was made to help the participants feel comfortable and at ease with sharing their stories. I believe the duality of my role as researcher and practitioner enhanced the conversations between interviewer and interviewee because of mutual respect for each other. The research process provided all of us opportunities to reflect on our mutual practices in support of young children with special needs as we engaged in the discourse about play.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

This section describes the implications for future research that were identified in the findings. Ideas for further research that expands on Early Childhood Special Educators' beliefs about play, suggestions for professional development and pre-service teacher education are discussed.

These accomplished teachers talked about how they managed to maintain a balance between theory and practice in their classrooms in the realm of play as a developmentally appropriate practice. They continued to seek professional development opportunities to become even more accomplished in their desire to support young children with special needs. Further conversations with teachers who are experienced in prekindergarten classrooms teaching young children with special needs would provide more understanding of how they achieve the balance between theory and practice. It would be important to identify the factors that support them in the use of developmentally appropriate practice despite the current trends in education.

Future research could examine the link between Early Childhood Special Educators beliefs and practice through observational studies in their classrooms

(McMullen, Elicker, Goetze, Huang, Lee, Mathers, Wen & Yang, 2006). Through careful observation, the actual instructional strategies these teachers use to implement play as a developmentally appropriate practice would be revealed. This could lead to professional development for pre-service and in-service teachers.

Professional development led by accomplished teachers that contains a coaching element which supports the teachers in their classrooms over a school year would be beneficial in educating new and seasoned teachers in the implementation of play as a developmentally appropriate practice. Workshops developed by and for teachers and parents would be of mutual benefit to all and in particular, help children with developmental delays to generalize play skills across multiple settings with the support of effective teaching strategies both at home and school.

For in-service teachers, these professional development opportunities would offer multiple opportunities for growth. These opportunities could provide ways to construct Individual Education Plan (IEP) goals and objectives as well as ways to prepare for teacher evaluations as teachers plan instruction.

> *When I was trying to get my students to answer wh questions, after reading a story or a page or two, they struggled with it. That is one of the things we really focused on during the plan, do, review part of Center Time. We asked what center did you play in? So they understood what is the activity? Who did you play with? Recently we added where? So know they are telling us where they played. They realize it is a location. Now we are going to the next level and relating it to stories. At first it was so abstract in a story, but now they understand when she asks this question, I am associating this response. I know when she says who she is talking about a person. She is not talking about a place. The foundation of play goes into other realms. Think about all the benefits for reading that we are starting with that foundation (7).*

Hanline, Milton and Phelps (2008) confirm the efficacy of dramatic play in building literacy skills. Answering and asking wh questions are frequent goals and objectives for young children with special needs. Responding to higher order (more complex) questions is a frequent item on teacher evaluation forms.

For pre-service teachers, play as a developmentally appropriate practice with all its complex elements should be an integral piece of teacher preparation. To prepare them to work in schools with young children they should be paired with accomplished teachers.

> *I had an intern, a few weeks into it, who said, when they told me I had pre-k I said oh, piece of cake, we are just going to play and she said she didn't realize how much work goes behind the play. I really do believe it takes a lot of work and effort to make learning look like play (7).*

As a doctoral student and practicing teacher mentor I have learned the value in staying close to the teachers who are living their stories in the classroom on a daily basis. They are working within a system to meet their children's' needs, the families' needs and maintaining their professionalism through the political changes in education. I believe my dual roles as researcher/ teacher educator and teacher mentor have provided me the opportunity to be both insider and outsider of this particular study. I was allowed into their world of every day practice as teachers of young children with special needs. It is an honor and a privilege to hear their beliefs conveyed in their passion about how they teach young children. It is my belief that these accomplished educators have much to teach teacher mentors and teacher educators as well as other practitioners. These are the teachers preparing our youngest children for their entry into formal school and to become productive, socially interactive, lifelong learners.

When you talk to teachers of older grades, they want them to come in with the foundation for academics, but when you ask them what do they struggle with the most. It is the children who do not have those basic social skills and if you don't have interactions with other children and learn the basics and you are not taught the basic social skills and interactions with other children that really does hinder your education. Think about how many times a teacher wants to buddy a student up to help them with something or how many times, and each year as you grow through the educational system there are more and more group projects and even at the university level. If you don't start these foundations on how to work together and how to problem solve, it is just a recipe for disaster. They might do well in isolation, I have a feeling they might get lonely. Everything goes back to the beginnings of play, the basic play skills and interactions and working together and learning about your environment (7).

The teacher participants in this study clearly stated their beliefs in play as a developmentally appropriate practice. They strive to teach their young students through playful interactions with adults and each other. The participants recognize the barriers of current trends in education but continuously reflect on their teaching to provide evidence-based instructional strategies that focus on the developmental needs of their students. They seek ways to improve their practice in the classroom through professional development, Professional Learning Communities and by staying abreast of the latest research on play.

The analysis of the perspectives and practices of these expert Early Childhood Special Educators, presented here informs policy makers, administrators and practitioners about how play as an accepted "best practice" is implemented in American classrooms today. Also identified is how Early Childhood Special Educators' beliefs impact their practice across the daily routine in prekindergarten classrooms (Ashiabi, 2007; Erwin & Delair, 2004; File, 1994; Logue & Harvey, 2009). The findings affirm the import of the

title, High Stakes Play, in its assertion that play is integral to the learning of young children.

And finally, in the words of one of the participants because I couldn't have said it better. *Oh, we just play in here! We run marathons! We conquer the world (6)!*

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Appendix A

March 1, 2011
eIRB Study Number: Pro3185

Dear Teacher,
I am a doctoral candidate at the University of South Florida. I am researching play as a developmentally appropriate practice in pre-kindergarten special education classrooms. I would like to invite you to participate in my research project. The second page of this letter contains a brief description of the study.
Your participation will consist of two or three semi-structured interviews in which I would ask you questions about your beliefs about the role of play in the pre-kindergarten special education classroom in which you teach.
Each session will be scheduled at your convenience in a comfortable public setting such as a coffee shop. With your permission, I plan to tape each interview in order to ensure accuracy and to minimize misunderstandings or misperceptions.
I will present you with an Informed Consent form for you to review before granting your permission.
In gratitude for your participation, you will receive a $10.00 gift certificate to Lakeshore Learning Store.

Thank you for your consideration,

Joanne Manwaring
Doctoral Candidate, University of South Florida

Appendix B

Research Questions

1. What are Early Childhood Special Educators beliefs/perspectives on play as a developmentally appropriate practice in their classrooms and what factors influence those beliefs?

2. In what ways is play implemented in the classroom?

3. What do Early Childhood Special Educators believe about the role of the adult in play?

4. What, if any, are the barriers to play as a developmentally appropriate practice in Early Childhood Special Education classrooms?

5. What supports would enable Early Childhood Special Educators to implement play more fully as a developmentally appropriate practice?

Interview Questions

1. How do you define play?

2. What is your understanding of the different types of play?

3. In what ways does do you believe play influences/impacts a child's development and learning?

4. How have your own educational experiences influenced your beliefs about the role and implementation of play in your classroom?

5. What is your perception of the role of play in school readiness?

6. Is play as you perceive it an integral part of the daily classroom routine?

7. How much time is devoted to play in your classroom?

8. How much is child initiated play? Adult initiated?

9. Describe the types of play you observe/facilitate/structure in your classroom?

10. What do you believe is the adult's role in play in your classroom?

11. What, if any, accommodations do you make to support individual children to play in your classroom?

12. What, if any obstacles or barriers to play are evident in your school?

13. What supports would enable you to implement play more fully as a developmentally appropriate practice?