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Advocating for the Development of the Whole Child: How Public Urban Preschool Teachers Overcome the Pressure of More Academics in Their Classrooms

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LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

Advocating for the Development of the Whole Child: How Public Urban Preschool
Teachers Overcome the Pressure of More Academics in Their Classrooms

by

Grizel Lopez

A dissertation presented to the Faculty of the School of Education,
Loyola Marymount University,
in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree
Doctor of Education

2015

Advocating for the Development of the Whole Child: How Public Urban Preschool
Teachers Overcome the Pressure of More Academics in Their Classrooms

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by

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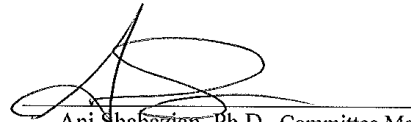
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Advocating for the Development of the Whole Child: How Public Urban Preschool Teachers
Overcome the Pressure of More Academics in Their Classrooms

by

Grizel Lopez

Preschool teachers must overcome the pressure to become more academic in lieu of a whole child development curriculum approach in order to preserve developmentally appropriate practices and shape well-adjusted future citizens of society. In order to achieve this, it is important to give a voice to preschool teachers to better understand their struggle and to find effective resolutions. This is only possible through a qualitative case study that employs observations, interviews, and a focus group with an inductive analysis approach to the data. The development of the whole child will only be attainable through national policies that are supported by sound research and ongoing teacher training that is aligned with that research. When theory and practice are aligned, it provides more opportunities for teachers, parents, and the rest of the community to advocate for the same goals, which ultimately benefits children.

CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Introduction

I have worked in the Early Childhood Education (ECE) field for the last decade. I worked in a public university ECE program as a student caregiver (work-study student) and as a teacher for infants and toddlers. In the last seven years, however, I have worked at a private university ECE program as a teacher for preschoolers and, more recently, as a preschool curriculum coordinator. In both of these settings, the focus has been on the development of the whole child from the social to the emotional, the cognitive, the physical, and the linguistic. As a teacher I have experienced times when parents ask me on the first day of school, “When is my child going to learn how to read? “Do they just play all day?” “Why is there no structure?” As a teacher, a few years ago, I thought that these types of questions from parents were more of the exception than the norm; today I feel this is no longer true and that these questions are being asked more frequently and when children are younger.

As an ECE administrator, I have the opportunity to sit in on parent-teacher conferences, and have found that more and more teachers are being asked, “When are you going to teach my child how to write?” “I love your philosophy, but you are doing a disservice to these children if you are not teaching them more academics explicitly?” Many parents have also decided to enroll their children in a more academic setting for half of the week while the remainder of the week they are engaged in a curriculum that fosters the development of the whole child. Parents admit that their children hate the more academic setting and say things such as, “It’s not like here. My

child always talks about this school. She does not want to go to the other school. She always cries in the morning at the other school.”

I have observed firsthand how these remarks and expectations from parents make the teachers feel confused, misunderstood, hopeless, and overwhelmed even when they have the support of the administration and work in an environment that fosters the development of the whole child over academics. It appears that, in the end, parents hold teachers responsible for what their children learn in the classroom, even if the teachers are abiding by the school’s philosophy and the school has attained or is in the process of attaining the greatest recognition in the ECE field: accreditation for providing a high-quality preschool experience. *High quality* in preschool is defined by its process and structural qualities.

Process quality emphasizes the actual experiences that occur in preschool; such as child-teacher interactions and the types of activities in which children are engaged. Process measures can also include health and safety provisions as well as materials available and relationships with parents. Process quality is measured through observations of the classroom and rating the multiple dimensions of the program. The Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS), a reliable and valid self-evaluation tool, has been widely used in early education research to measure process quality. The revised edition includes 43 items organized into seven areas that are expressed in a Likert-type scale with a score of 1 corresponding to *inadequate* and a score of 7 corresponding to *excellent*:

1. Space and furnishing,
2. Personal care routines,
3. Language-reasoning,

4. Activities (related to the development of the whole child),
5. Interaction,
6. Program structure, and
7. Parents and staff. (Espinosa, 2002)

The second way to measure quality is to review the *structural and teacher characteristics* of the program, such as teacher-child ratios, class size, qualifications and compensation of teachers and staff, and square footage. The structural features of a program are thought to contribute to quality in more indirect ways than process features. Structural features are frequently regulated through state licensing requirements, which often times simply require the bare minimum (Espinosa, 2002). However, the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS) and state licensing requirements are not always enough to assess the true quality of a preschool, and for this reason national organizations based on best practices from research are indispensable.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), founded in 1926, is an organization that works toward improving the quality of ECE for children from birth through eight years of age through a voluntary accreditation process that meets national standards of quality (www.naeyc.org). These standards have been developed after much disagreement about what practices are considered developmentally appropriate, when ECE starts and finishes, and what its overall purpose is (Goffin & Washington, 2007). NAEYC is rooted in the humanist tradition, “a system of thought that reflects concern for the values, potential, well-being, and interests of human beings” (Feeney, Moravcik, Nolte, & Christensen, 2010, p. 8), from European childhood education thinkers such as Rudolf Steiner, Maria Montessori, and

Loris Malaguzzi, who foster the development of the whole child (Feeney & Moravcik, 2005; Feeney, Moravcik, & Christensen, 2006). However, the ECE field is being pressured to move away from this foundation in favor of more academics as kindergarten becomes more rigorous, “Daily use of teacher-directed instruction, worksheets, and textbooks has increased, while more playful elements of the curriculum-art, pretend play, and digging in the sandbox-have declined” (Bowdon & Desimone, 2014, p. 6).

Toward the end of the 21st century, the purpose of the general public education system in the United States became more about academics and less about the development of the whole child by saturating students with facts and skills to reflect the social, economic, and political climate of the times (Goodlad, 1990). This purpose unfortunately gained momentum after the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), which pronounced the alleged failure of the public education system. For many decades, the field of ECE relied on practices grounded in child development and resisted pressure to change those practices. Today, however, ECE is at risk of not being its own educational entity for much longer as the expectations for what children can do academically in kindergarten grows, which then creates a different set of demands in the preschool classrooms that may lead to developmentally inappropriate practices (Miller & Almon, 2009). The term *developmentally appropriate practices* is generally used to refer to educational and child care practices that are based on a developmental view of the child—an understanding of the stages of physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development that children move through as they progress from infancy through toddlerhood, preschool, kindergarten, and the early elementary grades. This view rejects the idea that children are miniature adults, as well as the assumption that the earlier

a child learns to do something—such as reading, doing arithmetic, or using a computer—the more successful the child will be in school and adult life. Developmentally appropriate activities and practices are chosen because they accord with or enhance the general patterns and stages of child development and suit the needs of the individual child (Miller & Almon, 2009). The ECE humanistic traditions nonetheless are being challenged and affected by governmental demands for educational accountability (Bowdon & Desimone, 2014).

Study after study has supported the importance of the formative years before formal schooling (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2001; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Vandell & Wolfe, 2000). These studies, along with the three following trends, have put Early Childhood Education in the spotlight:

1. Unprecedented labor force participation of women has led to a higher demand for quality infant/toddler childcare and preschool.
2. An emerging consensus among professionals and parents that young children should be provided with educational experiences has also helped to increase the number of children enrolled in childcare and preschool.
3. Last, but not least, the accumulation of convincing evidence that young children are more capable learners than current practices reflect, and that good educational experiences in the preschool years can have a positive impact have helped the field of ECE grow. (Bowman et al., 2001, p. 3)

ECE is now part of the political agenda because of the belief that American students continue to lag behind those from other industrialized nations in most measures of achievement (American Progress Action Fund, 2005; Fiestritzer, 2006; State Higher Education Executive Officers, 2005;

U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Science, n.d.). The early learning years have emerged as crucial to children's later school success (Cost, Quality and Child Outcomes Study Team, 1995; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network, 1998; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 1999; Schweinhart, 1994).

There are currently more than 9.8 million preschoolers aged three to five years in the country (Johnson, 2005). The belief that their "readiness" is critical to later success manifested in nation-wide legislation and initiatives such as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). NCLB required states to design and implement a prekindergarten to grade 16 standards-based educational model. NCLB held states accountable for student learning in reading and math. Former president George W. Bush and First Lady Laura Bush contended that to achieve the goals set forth in NCLB, children must be ready for school (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.). Subsequently, in April 2002, the Bush Administration announced the Good Start, Grow Smart (GSGS) initiative. This initiative required states to create preschool content standards that address prereading, language, and math skills to "ensure that children enter kindergarten with the skills they will need to succeed at reading and other learning activities" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d., p. 1).

A more recent initiative presented by the Obama Administration was Race to the Top (RTT), which was part of the \$4.35 billion dollars included in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009. Race to the Top (RTT) was designed as an interstate competition for funds that resulted from the United States' alleged decline in the world academic performance rankings and a desire to improve schools. States had two opportunities to claim

some of this money by submitting their plans to address the criteria set forth by the initiative.

Points were awarded in the following four areas to determine the winners:

1. Adopting standards and assessments that prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace and to compete in the global economy.
2. Building data systems that measure student growth and success, and inform teachers and principals about how they can improve instruction.
3. Recruiting, developing, rewarding, and retaining effective teachers and principals, especially where they are needed most.
4. Turning around our lowest-achieving schools. (U.S. Department of Education, 2009, p. 2)

RTT education reform focused on accountability and student achievement, and, similar to NCLB, RTT included a section on innovations for improving early learning outcomes. The section on early learning outcomes was designed to close the achievement gap for young children within the ages of zero to five who are considered high needs. In California, a Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge (ELC) Pilot focused on providing grants, assessments, and professional development for ECE programs that adhered to the conditions of the RTT initiative. Unfortunately, it did not include a focus on the development of social-emotional skills in children as part of its assessment to rate the quality of preschools. When social-emotional skills are taken out of the equation, the focus becomes more academics, which pushes ECE programs to create less than ideal learning situations for children in exchange for funds and support.

In January 2013, during the State of the Union address, President Obama announced his plan for early education for all Americans, which aimed to expand access to high quality public

preschool to every child in America. President Obama said he believed this was the answer to a better future because, as he put it:

Studies show students grow up more likely to read and do math at grade level, graduate high school, hold a job, form more stable families of their own. We know this works. So let's do what works and make sure none of our children start the race of life already behind. (www.whitehouse.com)

At the state level, in spring 2014, the State of California debated whether to approve Senate Bill No. 837, also known as transitional kindergarten, introduced mainly by Senator Darrell Steinberg. In the end, it was not approved due to budgetary factors, but this bill proposed that each school district that already operates a kindergarten program should offer transitional kindergarten to four year olds. In theory, this bill strove to provide a high-quality public ECE experience to children who may not have the means to experience it otherwise—but in reality it was far from the truth. First of all, there was no consensus on a developmentally appropriate curriculum, and the focus was more on academics and less on the development of the whole child. Also, the recommended ratios from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) of one teacher for 10 children and the California licensing ratios of one teacher for 12 children increased to one teacher for 20 children under this bill. This bill also allowed teachers with a multiple-subject teaching credential, but with no ECE units or experience with younger children, to work in transitional kindergarten classrooms. On the other hand, the bill required ECE teachers to get a multiple-subject teaching credential and do their student teaching in a kindergarten–12 classroom, and not a transitional kindergarten. These were

some of the reasons why the California Child Development Administrators Association (CCDAA) took a stance against this bill from the very beginning.

Even though the Senate Bill No. 837 did not pass, transitional kindergarten has become an option in some private as well as public schools, which is appealing to some parents. A reason for this is guaranteed enrollment for kindergarten. Children that are enrolled in a school's transitional kindergarten often times automatically move into the school's kindergarten the following year.

NCLB, RTT, and transitional kindergarten emphasize achievement outcomes and feed into the notion of a more academic curriculum approach in ECE through direct instruction regardless of age and developmentally appropriate practices. Formal schools are becoming more competitive, and parents feel the need to make sure that children are "ready," which Elkind (2001) has referred to as the hurried child. This is also known as the acceleration of development, which intends to prematurely turn a preschooler into a first-grader (Zaporozhets, 1986). This usually means that children are ready academically and know their letters, the sound of the letters, numbers, shapes, and colors. This also means that children, at a minimum, can write their first and last names. All other areas of development are taken for granted as well as what the research says about high-quality preschools. This phenomenon has also changed how ECE teachers are trained, for example, critics of accountability policies argue that early childhood educators are beginning to emphasize procedural and teacher-directed learning while neglecting practices aimed at educating the whole child (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009).

Statement of the Problem

Bowman et al. (2001) suggested that teachers are the most important indicator of quality in ECE; therefore, it falls on the teachers to uphold the humanistic tradition and foundations of ECE. Political and legislative efforts have made it difficult to implement a high-quality ECE experience. Teachers are not able to bridge theory into practice because what they learned in their teacher preparation programs is not the reality they face in the classroom; in this sense, they experience a “wash out” effect (Levin, 2001; Weiss & Weiss, 1999; Zeichner & Tabachnick, 1981). Kagan (1993) found that teacher practices are influenced more by their personal qualities and experiences in field settings than what the teacher learns in the college classroom. A mismatch has been created between what teachers know and what parents and policy makers want (Bowman et al., 2001). How can teachers work with parents and other stakeholders without jeopardizing their beliefs and training in child development?

According to Ayers (1989), “Good preschool teachers [are those that can] dialogue and interact with children . . . and feel concern and compassion for the ways and lives of children” (p. 140). This description of a good preschool teacher may no longer apply in the current education reform of accountability because academic achievement outweighs relationships. Wien (1995) found that teachers struggle to reconcile concepts of developmentally appropriate practices in a field that is expecting more teacher-directed and academic lessons. Teachers also struggle with their professional reputation, general effort, and motivation to implement what they know about child development, which is in line with NAEYC best practices (Walker, 2003). The current education reform on bureaucracy, behaviorist theories, mandated curriculum, and prescribed testing have a strong impact on daily educational practices (Darling-Hammond,

1997). Young children are now under great pressure to meet inappropriate expectations, including academic standards that until recently were reserved for the primary grades, even though there is no evidence that a heavy emphasis on teacher-led instruction and scripted curricula yield long-term benefits (Miller & Almon, 2009). On the contrary, many experts believe that this pressure is a contributing factor in the rise of anger and aggression in young children and has led to an increase of normal child behavior being labeled as misbehavior (Miller & Almon, 2009). Furthermore, highly structured and teacher-directed preschools are known to depress motivation in children and increase stress levels and lack of compliance in them (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

The ECE field is rooted in the development of the whole child through developmentally appropriate practices; nonetheless, it must overcome external pressures from families, communities, and politicians. Teachers are left to make sense of these conflicting ideologies in their classrooms. Teachers must decide whether or not to do what is best for the children or to give in to the pressure to make their classrooms more academic. This dilemma may ultimately affect the quality of the teacher in the classroom, which is the number one indicator of a high-quality preschool experience for children (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). If teachers cannot provide the type of quality necessary to having a positive impact on children's development, then all of the benefits attributed to a high-quality ECE experience may disappear. In this sense, ECE will be no different than the rest of the public kindergarten–12 education system where teachers are expected to teach to the test and both teachers and children's creativity, autonomy, and integrity are not supported (Miller & Almon, 2009). Administrators must be ready to support their teachers and offer strategies to help them better communicate with parents about how a

whole child development curriculum approach really helps children become ready for formal schooling through developmentally appropriate practices such as play and child-centered learning. “Decades of research and theory in child development affirm the importance of play in the early years as the primary vehicle through which children build a strong foundation for cognitive, social, and emotional concepts” (Miller & Almon, 2009, p. 23); therefore, preschool classroom practices must continue to stay true to the ECE field of child development first-and not academic achievement (Armstrong, 2006).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study with preschool teachers was to gain a deeper understanding of the pressure they face from parents and other stakeholders to offer more academics in a preschool that implements a whole child development curriculum approach, as well as whether preschool teachers overcome this obstacle. This study sought to uncover whether this pressure had an impact on the quality of teaching in their classrooms. Furthermore, this study sought to determine how teachers reconcile what they know about child development and what is being asked of them from stakeholders that may or may not understand what an ECE entails. According to Miller and Almon (2009), “The problem is...ideological. Ideologies are deeply held beliefs that fill the vacuum created by the unavailability of hard data” (p. 13). It is also imperative to understand what support systems preschool teachers deem fundamental to help them implement a whole child development curriculum approach in light of pressure from parents and other stakeholders to teach more academics. These concepts were explored through a qualitative case study in which the teachers’ voices were gathered through observations, interviews, a focus group, and analysis of documents. This offered an insight into these

particular teachers' daily work with young children and how current policies and the growing interest in ECE truly impact the classrooms of these teachers on a daily basis.

Research Questions

The research questions driving this study were:

1. How do preschool teachers articulate the pressure they face from parents and other stakeholders to teach more academics when implementing a whole child development curriculum in an urban public preschool?
2. How do preschool teachers articulate the impact of this pressure on their actual practice and pedagogy in an urban public preschool?
3. What are the support systems that preschool teachers deem fundamental to implement a whole child development curriculum in light of pressure at an urban public preschool?

Significance of the Study

It was important to hear from the teachers on the frontlines about their experiences in the classroom. This study aimed to explore the pressure that preschool teachers face to become more academic in a preschool that advocates for a whole child development curriculum approach. These experiences offered insight into how their beliefs and practices in the classroom were affected and the impact this had on the children. This study also aimed to understand what support systems had a positive impact on teachers' implementation of a whole child development curriculum approach. A better understanding of preschool teachers' experiences when implementing a whole child development curriculum approach might inform training and professional development opportunities for preschool teachers. Training can, in turn, help

preschool teachers become better advocates for a whole child development curriculum approach in preschool, which can lead to more acceptance and overall support for it given the current shift toward more academics at a younger age. In this sense, the study can directly benefit children and preschools with a whole child development curriculum approach. If administrators have a better sense of teachers' experiences in the classroom then they can do more to help their teachers implement the school's philosophy of a whole child development curriculum approach.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that informed the research for this study was drawn from child development psychology, grounded in humanist traditions of European childhood education thinkers such as Rudolf Steiner, Maria Montessori, and Loris Malaguzzi, who championed the development of the whole child. Each of these thinkers was a founder of distinct yet similar approaches to ECE. For example, the Waldorf Approach, established by Rudolf Steiner, holds that the purpose of education is for the greater good of society. For this reason, children are encouraged to engage in personal experiences in order to foster critical thinking skills. The Montessori Approach, established by Maria Montessori, also acknowledges the importance of contributing to the community, and children are given the opportunity to partake in everyday living tasks. The Reggio Emilia Approach, established by Loris Malaguzzi, is a preschool and primary program that was started in Italy based on the principles of respect, responsibility, and community through exploration and discovery in a supportive and enriching environment based on the interests of the children (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998). Some of the unique features of this approach are the strong and competent image held of children; the specific role of the teacher and the environment; education as a means for collaboration among the children,

parents, and the larger community; long-term projects as vehicles for learning (depth over breadth in order to create meaningful learning experiences); and the hundred languages (different ways) children express themselves.

Lev Vygotsky, an early childhood psychologist, among others, also inspired the whole child development curriculum approach to ECE by highlighting the importance of play. His support for play serves as a foundation for national organizations such as NAEYC. However, current national policies and state initiatives are not aligned to the whole child development curriculum approach and instead push for more academics in preschool classrooms. Teachers are left in the middle to reconcile theory and practice.

Methodology

This inquiry used a qualitative research design to answer the research questions and employed a case study methodology. The site for this research was a public urban preschool that followed a whole child development curriculum approach. This research focused on the preschool teachers at this school. Yin (1994) and Merriam (1988) argued that case studies are a special kind of qualitative work that investigate a contextualized contemporary phenomenon within specified boundaries. In this case, this research investigated how preschool teachers overcame the pressure of more academics in their classrooms at a public urban preschool.

Data were collected between November 2014 and April 2015 through observations, interviews, follow-up interviews, a focus group, and analyses of documents. The observations took place in the classrooms of the six selected preschool teachers as well as one-hour interviews with each preschool teacher. A focus group with four out of the six preschool teachers also took place.

The observations were conducted during the first week of the fieldwork. After the observations, the interviews were conducted. At the end, a focus group provided further insight into preschool teachers' pressure to structure curriculum to be more academic in a public urban preschool with a whole child development curriculum approach. Throughout this process, different documents pertaining to a whole child development curriculum approach were analyzed, such as the schedule of the day, the weekly curriculum lesson plan, and children's individual binders.

The six preschool teachers were recruited through purposeful convenience sampling. The data collected from these teachers were analyzed inductively. As the data were collected, they were also transcribed. Then the data were coded in order to generate themes that were triangulated with all of the data. All of this was done before making interpretations, which allowed for a holistic and bounded case study.

Limitations/Delimitations

The limitations of this study were the demographics and location of the urban public preschool in greater Los Angeles. The student population was mostly Latino/a and might reflect different demographics than other urban public preschools. However, the largest student population in Los Angeles is 64.6% Latino/a (www.kidsdata.org). It might also be difficult to generalize this study to other urban public preschools with a whole child development curriculum approach.

There are also limitations set by the researcher. The study included teachers from one urban public preschool. It might be difficult to apply the findings to other urban public

preschools or those in different settings. These teachers also believed in a whole child development curriculum approach, which may not be the case for teachers at other preschools.

Definition of Terms

This section offers operational definitions of terms used in the study.

Developmentally Appropriate Practices: Meet children where they are and enable them to reach goals that are both challenging and achievable. They are appropriate to children's age and developmental status, attuned to them as unique individuals, and responsive to the social and cultural contexts in which they live. Goals and experiences are suited to their learning and development and challenging enough to promote their progress and interest.

Early Childhood Education (ECE): Programs that offer educational experiences from birth to age five.

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC): A large nonprofit organization in the United States representing early childhood education teachers, para-educators, center directors, trainers, college educators, families of young children, policy makers, and advocates. NAEYC focuses on improving the well-being of young children, with particular emphasis on the quality of educational and developmental services for children from birth through age eight.

Preschool: For the purposes of this study, preschool is defined as a place where children three, four, and five years old spend at least five hours a day during the week engaged with other children and adults, other than their legal guardians.

Transitional Kindergarten: A school grade that serves as a bridge between preschool and kindergarten, functioning to provide students with time to develop fundamental skills needed for success in school in an age-and developmentally appropriate setting.

Whole Child Development Curriculum: An approach to teaching and learning that focuses on the child's social, emotional, physical, linguistic, and cognitive development based on developmentally appropriate practices such as play, long-term projects, short-term projects, small groups, large groups, individual work, and child-initiated and teacher-initiated activities that are integrated through literacy, social studies, math, science, health, and art concepts.

Summary/Organization of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain a better understanding of the pressure preschool teachers face in the classroom when implementing a whole child development curriculum approach and to gain a deeper understanding of the support systems in place that help these preschool teachers articulate and highlight the importance of this method and philosophy in their classrooms. Chapter 1 describes the problem, purpose, and significance of this study. Chapter 2 provides an exhaustive literature review on this topic. Chapter 3 explains the qualitative methodology used for this case study. Chapter 4 discusses the findings and analysis regarding preschool teachers' pressure on becoming more academic in a preschool with a whole child development curriculum approach. Chapter 5 discusses the implications of this study and makes recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The literature review provides a theoretical framework of the shift from a humanist tradition of schooling, “a system of thought that reflects concern for the values, potential, well-being, and interests of human beings” (Feeney et al., 2010, p. 8), to a focus on more academics, specifically in Early Childhood Education (ECE). The development of the whole child as supported by Rudolf Steiner’s Waldorf approach, Maria Montessori’s approach, and Loris Malaguzzi’s Reggio Emilia approach, which were influenced by the work of Lev Vygotsky, an early childhood psychologist, is being challenged by policies such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Race to the Top (RTT), which have impacted parents’ beliefs. However, professional organizations such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) use child development research to promote a more comprehensive curriculum in ECE. Research on teachers’ impact and experiences is also discussed because teachers are at the forefront of these educational shifts, and the impact they have in the classroom is unquestionable.

A humanistic theoretical framework was used to help examine the voices and perspectives of six preschool teachers in Los Angeles who used a whole child development curriculum approach in their classrooms. The qualitative case study sought to gain a deeper understanding of these teachers’ experiences and support systems when implementing a whole child development curriculum approach through the analysis of their practices in relation to the current shift toward a more academic preschool. One of the great debates in education is “the nature of education itself and what the goals of schooling should be” (Owens & Valesky, 2011,

p. 35), which preschool teachers are experiencing now more than ever. The two competing views that weigh in on this debate are more academics versus the development of the whole child (Owens & Valesky, 2011). Preschools around the United States with a whole child development curriculum approach feel the pressure to become more academic, which is in stark contrast to the history and practices of ECE, as described below.

The history of ECE in the United States emerged out of various philosophers and educators, but it began with European roots from the Waldorf, Montessori, and Reggio Emilia approaches. The Waldorf approach posits that the future development of each individual child and of humanity as a whole depends on health-giving experiences in the first seven years of life; an atmosphere of loving warmth and guidance that promotes joy, wonder, and reverence (Steiner, 1921). Similarly, the Montessori approach believes in following the child, both developmentally and in terms of interests (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2009). The Reggio Emilia approach also advocates for children's multiple symbolic languages in their learning:

The child is made of one hundred. The child has a hundred languages, a hundred hands, a hundred thoughts, a hundred ways of thinking, of playing, of speaking. A hundred, always a hundred, ways of listening of marveling of loving. A hundred joys for singing and understanding, a hundred worlds to discover a hundred worlds to invent, a hundred worlds to dream. The child has a hundred languages (and a hundred hundred hundred more) but they steal ninety-nine. The school and the culture separate the head from the body. They tell the child; to think without hands, to do without head, to listen and not to speak, to understand without joy. To love and to marvel only at Easter and Christmas. They tell the child: to discover the world already there and for the hundred they steal

ninety-nine. They tell the child: that work and play, reality and fantasy, science and imagination, sky and earth, reason and dream, are things that do not belong together, and thus they tell the child that the hundred is not there. The child says: no way the hundred is there. (Malaguzzi, 1994, p. 1)

All of these approaches seek an appropriate ECE system based upon an understanding of child development. The Waldorf, Montessori, and Reggio Emilia approaches value the child as an individual and respects the importance of childhood (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2009). These three approaches to ECE fall under Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory (1978), which describes human learning as a process in society. For example, Vygotsky (1997) emphasized that "teaching must be set ... to satisfy the child's need" (p. 138) and not the teacher's agenda. In this sense, the development of the whole child is a right, which NAEYC supports and continues to advocate for year after year.

The Waldorf Approach

The development of the whole child is seen through the Waldorf, the Montessori, and the Reggio Emilia curriculum approach. Rudolf Steiner, founder of the Waldorf approach was born in 1861 in Austria-Hungary. He was known as a philosopher, scholar, educator, and social thinker (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2009). In 1919, he established the first Waldorf School in Germany in an effort to awaken in young, growing human beings the forces and faculties they would need in later life to be equipped for work in modern society and to obtain for themselves an adequate living (Steiner, 1919). The healthy development of these children into young adults of society was especially important in the early 1900s due to World War I and the spread of the Spanish Flu. These two chronosystem events, a term based on Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979)

ecological model of child development, were responsible for the deaths of more than 30 million people. During these difficult times in human history, the nurturing and protection of children as well as the fostering of critical thinking skills were essential (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2009), especially because so many of them lost their parents, homes, and identities. For this reason, the Waldorf School became an extension of the home, environmentally and functionally, where a mixed-age group setting would serve the purpose of an extended family, specifically the replication of siblings (Steiner, 1919).

The Waldorf approach was created under Steiner's philosophical belief of *anthroposophy*, "the exploration of humanity in combination with the spiritual" (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2009, p. 312). In this sense, the Waldorf approach is a humanistic theory that aims to develop the "wholeness" of the child through personal experiences (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2009). This "wholeness" element of the Waldorf approach resonated with the ideas of an American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer of that time period, that of John Dewey (1902), who believed that "the child's life is an integral, a total one. The things that occupy him are held together by the unity of the personal and social interests which his life carries along" (p. 23). There is no evidence that Steiner and Dewey ever met to discuss philosophy and education even though they were only born three years apart; however, they both agreed that the greater good of society was the ultimate goal for education, even though the process to get there might differ.

Steiner (1921) viewed children as curious and impressionable beings that would assure survival and moral goodness through adults' guidance, both directly and indirectly. He believed that children should not be rushed in their development, but instead should be allowed to reach

the highest quality of development at their own pace (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2009). This development was reached through play, which according to Vygotsky (1967), served as a social context in which children can intrinsically learn. Children learn through the context of the environment as well as from the teacher (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2009).

The Waldorf approach, like the Montessori approach, requires that teachers be trained specifically in the Waldorf philosophy and theories behind its pedagogical methods in order to properly incorporate the Waldorf ideals into the classroom. There are currently over 50 full-time training schools around the world that focus on the lectures and writings of Steiner (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2009). Waldorf philosophy has been incorporated into public and private schools around the world. Similar to Montessori schools, many of these schools implement the Waldorf philosophy without any regulation or restrictions; therefore, the quality of the programs is not consistent.

The Waldorf approach to ECE focuses on the importance of imitation and play, as well as the establishment of rhythm and routine (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2009). Steiner believed that young children developed a sense of community through imitation and play. Therefore, it is essential that teachers model for the children the tenets that Steiner believed to be valuable. These elements include engaging in house and classroom work such as mending materials, preparing food, and caring for the environment. The teacher never asks the children to do these things but instead welcomes them to imitate or join in the teacher's tasks when the children initiate it. This concept of the teacher acting as a model for children and not intervening in what the child actually does is similar to the Montessori teacher's role. Maria Montessori described this relationship between teacher and child, with the analogy of a master and a good valet

(Montessori, 1949). The valet keeps him- or herself and the environment presentable but never tells the master what to do. The valet also never disturbs the master but if called responds quickly. By imitating the teacher in daily chores, the children not only learn to contribute to the community but also learn interdependence. Steiner believed that play was another way that children developed a sense of community (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2009). Play allows the child to role-play and practice their social skills and the different functional roles of community members. Vygotsky (1967) also referred to play as crucial for the development of social rules, for example, house play where children adopt the roles of different family members. Lastly, Steiner believed that the rhythm and routine of the classroom helped to foster a sense of community. The teacher establishes routines that are repeated daily, weekly, seasonally, and yearly (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2009). The children depend on the predictability to feel secure and build trust in their teacher and community.

Waldorf teachers espouse three key feelings toward early childhood education: reverence, enthusiasm, and protection (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2009). Reverence is the attitude the teacher has toward a child. Teachers take care and great intention in how they approach a child, what they say, and how they speak and give children the time they need. Although teaching children is often challenging, Waldorf teachers accept their role with enthusiasm. Children are able to see this enthusiasm and are affected by it. This helps to nurture the child's sense of wonder and curiosity when exploring the world. Waldorf teachers also protect the whole child: physically, emotionally, socially, and psychologically. They do this by creating a stress-free environment, allowing children to grow at their own pace, and promoting good health by offering natural foods to the children.

Waldorf teachers also create an environment for the children that is both engaging and responsive. Reggio Emilia schools refer to this concept of the environment as the third teacher (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2009). In Waldorf schools, there is a focus on aesthetic beauty and a feeling of warmth. This is often noticeable in the choice of colors in a Waldorf classroom. The teachers choose hand-crafted wooden toys and materials that are inviting to the children, and many of them are natural materials such as sticks and shells. They choose open-ended materials so that children learn that the possibilities are endless, rather than learning that there is one correct way to do something. The use of open-ended materials is, however, different than that of Montessori materials. Montessori materials are designed with a correct answer and are intended to help a child understand the learning experience as well as to focus on a key concept (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2009). In retrospect, the Waldorf teacher's role is to encourage children to learn through self-discovery. The teacher provides opportunities for children to work and play together and ensures that there are plenty of opportunities throughout the day for children to actively engage themselves, which leads to learning.

Easton (1997) stated that the Waldorf curriculum is designed to educate the whole child: "the head, the heart, and the hands," or the social, emotional, spiritual, moral, physical, and intellectual development of the child. Social development is fostered through play. Children must learn to negotiate conflicts that arise as well as learn social rules when interacting with peers. Emotional development is nurtured in the relationships between the children, the teacher, and peers. Through art experiences, the children learn to feel the colors and shapes and to express themselves. Spiritual development is supported again through the imitation of the teacher. The children imitate the teacher's reverence for children, the classroom, and food.

Physical development is stimulated through movement. Significant amounts of time are spent outdoors, which enables the children to use their gross motor skills while fine motor skills are developed while doing arts. Lastly, intellectual development is supported through play and imitation. Steiner felt that one of the most important goals of Waldorf early childhood education curriculum is to help children develop a sense of responsibility and self-regulation (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2009). This is fostered in the classrooms through free choice in activities. By allowing children to make their own choices, children learn self-control. This also serves as an accurate indicator of what the child can or cannot do and where his or her interests lie.

Waldorf teachers are very aware of the developmental progress of their children. They use Steiner's theory of child development as a guideline and adjust the curriculum to meet the needs of each child. Teachers gather information from classroom observations as well as from the parents to learn about the child's progress. Instead of using this information to formally grade or scale the child, Waldorf teachers take a more holistic, formative, and interpersonal approach to assessment. Teachers have been known to write poems or draw pictures to depict some of the traits they feel the child has developed (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2009). This type of assessment is much more personal and meaningful than a simple letter grade. This approach to assessment is very respectful and telling of the values and beliefs held by the Waldorf approach.

The Waldorf approach to ECE is appealing to many that "promote a healthy, unhurried, developmentally appropriate learning environment for young children" (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2009, p. 312). For this reason, the commonalities between the Waldorf approach and the developmentally appropriate practices created by NAEYC are no surprise (Bredenkamp &

Copple, 1997). Similarly, the idea of reconnecting with nature and the community is a very appealing aspect of the Waldorf approach and can be currently seen in Reggio Emilia:

The children noticed how people changed their speed and posture in walking, how the shining reflections and the splash from the puddles changed the streets, how the raindrops made different sounds depending on where on the street they were landing. (Edwards et al., 1998, p. 106)

The Waldorf approach, like the Montessori approach, has become a well-known and popular ECE program across the nation, but unfortunately the practice is confined mainly to private preschools and much less in public ones. Nonetheless, across its schools the belief is the same, “Childhood matters . . . the early years are not a phase of life to be rushed through, but constitute a stage of tremendous importance needing to be experienced fully in its own right” (Oldfield, 2001, p. xvii).

The Waldorf approach, unfortunately, lacks research data that highlights its benefits (Gerwin & Mitchell, 2006), especially when its curriculum is not focused on teaching academics or teaching to the test (Oppenheimer, 1999). This lack of evidence can lead some to disregard the Waldorf approach; however, in a recent survey based on the responses of about 550 Waldorf high school graduates in the United States and Canada, 94% responded that they had attended college (Gerwin & Mitchell, 2007).

The Montessori Approach

Maria Montessori, founder of the Montessori approach, was born in 1870 in Italy (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2009). Montessori became one of the first female physicians in Italy, which gave her the opportunity to work with children with special needs. The first Montessori

school, better known as the Casa dei Bambini (Children's House) was established in 1907 (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2009). Similar to the Waldorf approach and the Reggio Emilia approach, Montessori classrooms are recognized for how the materials are arranged. There are open floor spaces with low, open shelves that encourage individual or small group work as opposed to a classroom where all of the furniture is "oriented in one direction for teacher directed instruction" (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2009, p. 337). The children choose what to explore and cooperation is encouraged.

Another skill that is fostered is responsibility to care for and put away materials. The responsibility to take care of the environment is essential for a Montessori learning environment in the development of community life (Lillard, 1972). The sense of community is achieved through a mixed-age group setting as well as through an emphasis on practical life (everyday living) such as cleaning, cooking, and gardening. A whole child development curriculum approach redefines what it means to educate children. Under this context, it means to challenge and stimulate the children's ideas, questions, and ways of thinking by exploring the children's interests through different means in order to make a greater connection. The children also educate the teachers with their questions, curiosity, reasoning, and problem solving. "To educate" also encompasses social skills, which are very important, especially in a fast growing technological world. Unfortunately, to many, "to educate" also means to teach from a top-down approach, to get through as much material as possible, and to help children memorize and regurgitate information that has no emotional connection or any connection to the children. In this scenario, "to educate" also means to prepare for the next thing and not focus nor invest in the

present. The idea “to educate” does not support the development of the whole child and often times is in conflict with what is developmentally appropriate, especially at the preschool age.

Montessori viewed the first period of life, birth to six years of age, to be the most developmentally dynamic and of the highest importance (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2009). For this reason, she believed in the impact of movement on learning and cognition, giving children choices, collaborative arrangements, meaningful contexts for learning, order in the environment, and optimal adult interaction styles with children (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2009). Montessori’s educational philosophy went hand in hand with her view of human development, which was that of the whole person. Montessori believed in the absorbent mind of a child, “the creation of mental muscles based on experiences from the world,” in the development of her mind, body, and soul (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2009, p. 341). This approach to child development is similar to that of Vygotsky’s socio-constructivist theory (1978), as seen in the Waldorf approach, and also the Reggio Emilia approach as explored next. The overall goal is to help children function in the real world by fostering a sense of responsibility for themselves and their communities.

The Reggio Emilia Approach

Loris Malaguzzi, founder of the Reggio Emilia approach, was born in Italy in 1920. Malaguzzi began his career as a teacher before taking on administrative roles. The Reggio Emilia approach, like the Waldorf and Montessori approaches, is also a social constructivist-based curriculum. The Reggio Emilia approach understands the importance of knowing about how children think and how this thinking changes development, specifically in the pre-operational stage (Huitt, 2003), as described by Swiss developmental psychologist and philosopher Jean Piaget, where children reconstruct their thoughts into more sophisticated use of

symbols to express their ideas (Cadwell, 1997). For this reason, children have a hundred languages to express their realization of the world through sculpture, drawing, painting, dance, drama, writing, and puppetry. All of these projects lead to the display and documentation of the children's work through a holistic approach (Edwards et al., 1998). Additionally, the Reggio Emilia approach takes into consideration the image and role of the learner, the child, as well as the image and role of the teacher. The child is seen as an active constructor of knowledge and the teacher is seen as a researcher that asks questions, makes observations, and analyzes data (Cadwell, 1997).

The first Reggio Emilia school was founded in 1963 with the help of the city's citizens. Educational settings like those in Reggio Emilia go beyond the extension of the home and into the community and overall life. The Reggio Emilia approach "is much more than an eclectic mix of theories. The ideas from which it draws have, for over 30 years, been reflected upon, expanded, and adapted within the context of the unique culture of Reggio Emilia, Italy" (Edwards et al., 1998, p. 99). This extension of the community and overall life are brought back into the classroom and analyzed in small group work, which leads to long-term projects. Similar to Waldorf teachers, Reggio Emilia teachers have a unique way of reflecting on their practices while simultaneously reflecting on their children's learning.

In the Reggio Emilia approach, documentation is a systematic form of gathering information of children's work and their development through pictures, journals, videotapes, and other means that serves three functions:

1. It provides children with a concrete and visible “memory” of what they do and say.
2. It provides parents and the community with detailed information about what is happening in the classroom.
3. It provides teachers with a tool for research and a key to continuous improvement and renewal (Edwards et al., 1998).

The third function is to help teachers implement developmentally appropriate practices.

Documentation requires observation of the children, not simply supervision, time, critical thinking, and listening. Just like children must be guided on a new task, so must teachers.

Teachers must know what to look for, how to interpret what they see, and how to take it to the next step. The process of documentation not only creates stronger relationships between the child and the teacher, but also improves the way curriculum is being implemented and what is being implemented (Edwards et al., 1998). Documentation, however, is not an end product. It is an ongoing process that fosters communication with parents and allows teachers to constantly reflect on their practices (Bredekamp & Copple, 2009). It is extremely important to cultivate a sense of community as it helps to reflect on teachers’ practices as well as children’s learning as emphasized by Vygotsky.

Vygotsky

Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory (1978) is known in more general terms as a socioconstructivist theory because of its belief that children coconstruct knowledge with the world around them. For this reason, it is well known in the ECE field and offers a useful approach for teachers to use with their children, specifically the zone of proximal development, the distance between what a child can do independently and what the child can do with

assistance, and the means through which this is achieved, also known as *scaffolding*, a term introduced by Jerome Bruner (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976), an American psychologist. Scaffolding is the gradual release of responsibility from the expert (the teacher) to the learner (the student), which results in a child eventually becoming fully responsible for his or her own performance. This gradual release of responsibility is accomplished by continuously decreasing the degree of assistance provided by the teacher without altering the learning task itself. The socioconstructivist theory focuses on observing the child's development, interactions with others, and understanding of his or her culture, which allows developmentally appropriate practices to occur by offering an insight into the multiple layers of a child's life and hence his or her development. The zone of proximal development and scaffolding serve as a form of learning and teaching as well. This is useful information in creating an emergent curriculum that is based on children's interests and skills, in contrast to a top-down curriculum where lesson plans are generalized and chosen by the adult (Gonzalez-Mena & Eyer, 2004).

Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory (1978) emphasized the influence of culture, peers, adults, and school-settings on the development of the whole child. Vygotsky (1978) also referred to language as the most important psychological tool that shapes children's thinking in relation to their interactions with others within specific contexts of culture. For this reason, it is extremely important that teachers speak to children in a developmentally appropriate manner. Even though the explicit language that adults use with children is of importance, the way in which adults communicate with them should also be considered and this starts from birth if not before (Gonzalez-Mena & Eyer, 2004). Therefore, the communication style that develops between the teacher and the child can also facilitate their relationship.

Whole Child Development Curriculum Approach

The Waldorf, Montessori, and Reggio Emilia approaches to ECE all focus on the development of the whole child: the social, emotional, physical, cognitive, and linguistic self. For example, the Waldorf approach focuses less on the cognitive aspect in comparison to the Montessori approach, but the Reggio Emilia approach strikes the perfect balance between all of the developmental domains. All of these approaches fall under Vygotsky's (1978) socioconstructivist theory whereby others and the environment play very important roles. A misconception that exists for preschools with a whole child development curriculum approach is that cognitive skills do not matter, which is not the case. Cognitive skills are very important, but they are intertwined with the physical, social, and emotional ones. For example, "To succeed in reading and at school, a child must receive appropriate education, but she must also be physically and mentally healthy, have reasonable social skills, and have curiosity, confidence, and motivation to succeed" (Zigler, Gilliam, & Barnett, 2011, p. 87). If cognition is the only focus, then the rest of the child is ignored, which promotes an educational system designed to fail, "This jeopardizes our youngsters. They are not learning to think. They are learning that a lot of school is useless and are being turned off to learning" (Vail, 2003, p. 4). The development of the whole child is of extreme importance, but how that is supported matters as well.

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)

NAEYC is a non-profit organization that created developmentally appropriate practices in ECE programs to promote excellence through a framework of best practices (www.naeyc.org). These practices are "grounded both in the research of child development and learning and in the knowledge base regarding educational effectiveness" (Bredekamp & Copple, 2009, p. 1).

NAEYC's position aligns with the development of the whole child as seen through the Waldorf, Montessori, and Reggio Emilia approaches. NAEYC also believes that teachers are the number one indicator of a high-quality preschool. NAEYC serves as a guide for ECE programs whether they are accredited or not unless these programs must align to federal regulations and standards. Many times these federal standards focus on mandated areas, which narrow the scope of the curriculum, and focus on superficial learning objectives. This can lead to practices of concern such as excessive lecturing to the whole group, fragmented teaching of discrete objectives, insistence that teachers follow rigid schedules, and curtailing valuable experiences such as problem solving, rich play, collaboration with peers, opportunities for social and emotional development, outdoor/physical activity, and the arts. Children are then less likely to develop a love of learning and a sense of their own competence and ability to make choices, and they miss much of the joy and expansive learning of childhood (Wien, 1995).

On the contrary, standards based on developmentally appropriate practices keep in mind what is known about: child development and learning, each child as an individual, and the social and cultural contexts in which children live (Bredekamp & Copple, 2009). There are 12 principles under child development and learning that inform developmentally appropriate practices as seen in NAEYC's standards for curriculum:

1. All the domains of development and learning are important, and they are closely interrelated. Children's development and learning in one domain influence and are influenced by what takes place in other domains.

2. Many aspects of children's learning and development follow well-documented sequences, with later abilities, skills, and knowledge building on those already acquired.
3. Development and learning proceed at varying rates from child to child, as well as at uneven rates across different areas of a child's individual functioning.
4. Development and learning result from a dynamic and continuous interaction of biological maturation and experience.
5. Early experiences have profound effects, both cumulative and delayed, on a child's development and learning; and optimal periods exist for certain types of development and learning that occur.
6. Development proceeds toward greater complexity, self-regulation, and symbolic or representational capacities.
7. Children develop best when they have secure, consistent relationships with responsive adults and opportunities for positive relationships with peers.
8. Development and learning occur in and are influenced by multiple social and cultural contexts.
9. Always mentally active in seeking to understand the world around them, children learn in a variety of ways; a wide range of teaching strategies and interactions are effective in supporting all these kinds of learning.
10. Play is an important vehicle for developing self-regulation as well as for promoting language, cognition, and social competence.

11. Development and learning advance when children are challenged to achieve at a level just beyond their current mastery, and also when they have many opportunities to practice newly-acquired skills.
12. Children's experiences shape their motivation and approaches to learning, such as persistence, initiative, and flexibility; in turn, these dispositions and behaviors affect their language development (Bredekamp & Copple, 2009).

These principles are necessary in the implementation of a whole child development curriculum approach, but are non-existent in current national legislations that affect ECE. This creates a contradiction between theory, practice, and policy.

Policies: NCLB and Race to the Top's (RTT) Impact on Parents' Beliefs

Federal education policies such as No Child Left Behind (2001) and Race to the Top (2009) recently changed the way public schools operate in the kindergarten-12 system, which had an impact on how stakeholders view preschool. Many teachers teach to the test to avoid the consequences of being a low performing school at the expense of student engagement and learning (Brandon, 2002). For example, in Head Start programs, established in 1965 to meet the social, emotional, physical, and cognitive needs of disadvantaged preschool children; training to help teachers meet quality standards was diverted to training teachers in literacy instruction with the enactment of educational policies from the Bush Administration (Zigler et al., 2011). A new reporting system was also instituted that imposed standardized testing of Head Start preschoolers twice a year to assess their cognitive development (Raver & Zigler, 2004). Furthermore, assessments of children's social and emotional functioning in ongoing national evaluations were stopped in favor of assessments that showed whether or not children were meeting specified

goals on pre-literacy and pre-math tests (Schumacher, Greenberg, & Mezey, 2003). These changes not only affected the children, but parents as well, as they created a sense of urgency that still exists today.

Parents feel the pressure to prepare their children academically at a younger age because they believe there is an educational crisis even though Berliner and Biddle (1995) claimed that it was manufactured. In any case, parents begin to demand more academics at the cost of the development of the whole child because they believe academics are best (Krogh, 1995). They begin to view the development of the whole child as something negative and play as a waste of time because it promotes the perception that children are not learning (Vail, 2003). It is not uncommon for parents in play-based preschools to ask for proof of what their children are learning and say things such as, “I know play is important, but could you just throw in some worksheets,” which are tangible items, but parents cannot see that when their children are playing restaurant, they point out letters on the cereal box (Vail, 2003, p. 3). There are some parents however, that disagree with this push-down curriculum and have decided to “red-shirt” their kindergarten-age children, as they prefer to hold them back a year rather than have them face academic requirements at the age of five (Vail, 2003, p. 4). Nonetheless these parents are in the minority. In the end, parents are the customers of early childhood programs, and as such, these programs are likely to eventually succumb to parental pressure and change curricula to reflect parental preferences, even if these are ill advised (Zigler et al., 2011).

Research by Marcon (2002), concluded that children that went to a more academically oriented preschool earned significantly lower grades by the end of fourth grade than those who had been allowed more opportunities to learn through play. This conclusion comes as no

surprise to neuroscientists who explain how children younger than seven are better suited for active exploration than didactic explanation because over-structuring discourages exploration (Kohn, 2015). For example, reading, in particular, is a skill that many parents believe children acquire naturally like walking, but they forget that it is not prewired into the brain and therefore it can only be fostered and not forced (Kohn, 2015). Yet reading is part of the kindergarten curriculum even though children that start learning how to read at age five have lower reading comprehension than those who began learning later (Suggate, Schaughency, & Reese, 2013).

The evidence is out there: access to high quality preschool is necessary, but not as a means to get a head start on formal schooling. However, this evidence is falling on deaf ears including educators of preschool programs that promote the development of the whole child. Parents demand more academics in these programs and for this reason it is important to hear from these preschool teachers because, unlike their colleagues in other public preschool and kindergarten programs that must abide by a prescribed curriculum, these preschool teachers have the opportunity to speak up and advocate for a whole child development curriculum approach. There are a few studies that have begun to focus on kindergarten through third-grade teachers and their experiences with NCLB, RTT, and more recently the Common Core, all of which focus on accountability, testing, and academics. Preschool teachers' experiences however are nonexistent to the public eye, yet these same policies have had a trickled down effect on parents' expectations, the preschool teachers' pedagogy, and the support systems they need in place to make a whole child development curriculum approach a priority in their classrooms.

Teachers: Their Impact, Experiences, and Beliefs

There is no doubt that a secure attachment relationship, whether it is secondary or tertiary, contributes to a child's development (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Honig, 2002; Howes & Ritchie, 2002; Hyson, Copple, & Jones, 2010), and the development and maintenance of secure attachment relationships between teachers and children is an indicator of a high-quality program (Love, Raikes, Paulsell, & Kisker, 2002). An important aspect of a high-quality program is teachers' responsiveness to the needs of their students because it influences young children's psychological, social, emotional, and intellectual development (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Bowman et al., 2001; Cost and Quality, Outcome Team, 1995; Howes & Ritchie, 2002; Lally & Mangione, 2002; Love et al., 2002), and research showed both concurrent and long-term positive effects (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001). Furthermore, a positive relationship between teachers and children provides a secure base from which to grow and learn, both socially and academically (Honig, 2002; Howes & Hamilton, 1993).

Teachers' and students' relationships in ECE are one part of the equation when it comes to high-quality programs. Another part of the equation is "actively work[ing] with families in support of children's development and learning" (Powell, 2000, p.61). However, this area of focus is often times overlooked by early childhood teacher preparation programs (Gonzalez-Mena & Bhavnagri, 2000). Bowman et al. (2001) noted that the ECE field today is "characterized by teachers with a minimum of training" that depicts a "mismatch between preparation (and compensation) of the average early childhood professional and the growing expectations of parents and policy makers" (p. 261). Teachers face a social context that may not be supportive of the knowledge, practices, and attitudes they develop in their training

(VanderVen, 2000). What teachers apply in their classroom from their training is determined by how they manage and reconcile the social context they enter. Kagan (1993) alluded to this point: “Once teachers leave their training programs, their pedagogical beliefs and practices are shaped not by research, but by their own classroom experiences” (p. 3). Teachers adapt to the existing curriculum in the school, rather than utilize a curriculum approach according to their beliefs and ability to cope in the realities of the school day (Shulman, 2004). In the United States, “intelligence” is equated with “academics, which has become a powerful and pervasive attitude” more than ever (Bowman et al., 2001). This attitude is counterintuitive to a whole child development curriculum approach, yet teachers face this pressure to “adapt” even when their work place, and for the most part, the field of ECE do not embrace it.

With the growing emphasis on academics in preschool, teachers are now looking for guidance on how to choose instructional practices that are not only developmentally appropriate but that also demonstrate learning (Bodrova, Leong, & Paynter, 1999). Others, sadly, have decided to leave the field “because they are very distressed” by the current preschool situation (Vail, 2003, p. 4).

I found myself between a rock and a hard place. I needed to meet the demands of our customers. However, being an early childhood educator, I knew that if I did only what was in demand, it would not be right for the children. All parents want now are worksheets, and they want them in their babies’ hands as early as possible. (Bodrova & Leong, 2003, p. 3)

There are some however who applaud the increased academic emphasis, especially with low-income children because “they start way behind and don’t catch up” (Vail, 2003, p. 2). Even

though they realize that these academic expectations do not allow time for anything else, they accept the pressure and ask parents to work on the nonacademic skills at home because deep down inside they know those skills matter (Vail, 2003). Both cognitive and noncognitive abilities are important determinants of schooling, socioeconomic, and equally predictive of success in many aspects of life (Heckman, Stixrud, & Urzua, 2006).

Conclusion

Chapter 2 provided a theoretical context of a humanist approach to preschool, as seen in comprehensive curricula such as one centered on the development of the whole child. The literature review was designed to offer a better understanding of a whole child development curriculum approach and the special role teachers carry out. Special attention was given to present policies and organizations that hinder and advance this approach to ECE. Research on teachers' impact, experiences, and beliefs was also discussed because teachers are at the forefront of these educational shifts and the impact they have in the classroom is unquestionable. Though many studies agree that there is a mismatch between how teachers are trained and what they experience in the classroom, none of the literature has provided a concrete analysis of the teachers' experiences with parents and other stakeholders in terms of implementing a whole child development curriculum approach. Furthermore, teachers' voices are always important to hear especially in the ECE field.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Introduction

Preschool, in recent years, has become more academic in an attempt to give the children and their parents a false sense of a head start to formal schooling at the expense of the development of the whole child. A whole child development curriculum approach is more than random memorization of facts that offer no relevance to children's lives, but instead it is emergent, integrated, comprehensive, intentional, and developmentally appropriate. This approach to preschool has become the exception due to a recent push for a more academic curriculum, and teachers who do not embrace this alternative often times feel pressure to make the change.

This case study brought to life six preschool teachers' experiences when implementing a whole child development curriculum approach. These experiences were highlighted by elevating preschool teachers' voices, which can only be done authentically through a qualitative research design. Teachers' voices are almost nonexistent in the Early Childhood Education (ECE) research field even now when the field has gained more recognition and respect. For this reason, it is of extreme importance to learn about what these preschool teachers endure when the purpose of preschool has changed so drastically in order to align with federal policies and societal beliefs.

This chapter describes how a qualitative case study answered the research questions at hand as well as the methods and procedures to collect data. The data analysis plan is also discussed.

Research Design

Qualitative Methodology

In order to answer the research questions and gain a deep understanding of these teachers' experiences, a qualitative research design was used. Merriam (1998) talked about multiple realities and how the individual, based on his or her interactions with the world, interprets these realities. A better understanding of preschool teachers' realities can only be attained through a qualitative research design in which teachers' beliefs and experiences can be captured.

Case study design. This particular qualitative study used an illustrative case study design, a unit of analysis that allows the researcher to delve deeply into the research questions in this inquiry related to preschool teachers (Merriam, 1998). Case studies are characterized by detailed examinations of one setting (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Merriam (1998) has also distinguished case studies as defined and bounded in order to gain a better understanding of what is really taking place in any one environment. Therefore, this case study can be considered heuristic because it sought to provide new meaning (Merriam, 1998). A case study design offered the ideal format for an in-depth analysis into preschool teachers' experiences when implementing a whole child development curriculum approach. Gaining an insight into these teachers' experiences in one setting helped shed light on the current situation in preschools nationwide and the resistance teachers face from parents and the larger society when implementing a whole child development curriculum approach.

Research Questions

The following questions addressed how the shift toward a more academic preschool affects the implementation of a whole child development curriculum approach:

1. How do preschool teachers articulate the pressure they face from parents and other stakeholders to teach more academics when implementing a whole child development curriculum in an urban public preschool?
2. How do preschool teachers articulate the impact of this pressure on their actual practice and pedagogy in an urban public preschool?
3. What are the support systems that preschool teachers deem fundamental to implement a whole child development curriculum in light of pressure at an urban public preschool?

Research Setting

Eastnorth Children's Center. Eastnorth Children's Center was the fictitious name of the organization that housed the preschool where this case study took place. This center offered other social services and educational programs in addition to the preschool. Among the services offered by the center were family intervention programs, adoption and foster care placement, and a range of vital, integrated services, such as disabilities screenings and advocacy, nutrition, parenting classes, counseling, bilingual domestic violence prevention classes, dental and vision screenings, and pediatric health consultations. However, the focus of this inquiry centered on its preschool.

The site location for this qualitative case study was Eastnorth Children's Center, specifically its preschool program on site, which opened its doors to the Los Angeles community

over 25 years ago. At the time of data collection, the Eastnorth Children's Center served students that were 80% Latino/a, some of whom were low-income. The Eastnorth Children's Center consisted of three preschool classrooms with three teachers in every classroom. This preschool had a total of nine teachers. Three teachers were male and six teachers were female. They had worked at the Eastnorth Children's Center between one and seven years. Their ages ranged from the early 20s to the late 30s. Their education ranged from Associate degrees to Master's degrees in Early Childhood Education. Some of these teachers were Teach for America (TFA) corps members. Most of the teachers were Latino/a and spoke fluent Spanish.

According to the Eastnorth Children's Center website, the children learned from trained, bilingual teachers and child development specialists who tailored developmentally appropriate and individualized lesson plans for children that:

1. Help them develop social-emotional skills, including executive functions (sharing, taking turns, expressing emotions, self-control, self-awareness, self-confidence, sense of autonomy, etc.)
2. Help them develop cognitive skills (number and beginning math skills, color and shape recognition, object permanency, letter recognition and writing, etc.)
3. Support their healthy physical development (fine and gross motor skills, speech and auditory skills, visual perception, health hygiene habits, safety, healthy meals, etc.)

Eastnorth Children's Center preschool program offered a whole child development curriculum approach, as opposed to a more academic one, and at the time of data collection, was in the process of attaining National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) accreditation.

Participants and Sampling Criteria

The participants in this research were the preschool teachers at Eastnorth Children's Center preschool program. This case study employed purposeful convenience sampling to select the preschool teachers at the school. The researcher asked the Early Education Director, who oversees the preschool teachers, curriculum development, and professional development, to provide the names and emails of all nine teachers. The researcher then emailed the teachers requesting their participation in the research project. Once the preschool teachers volunteered to participate in this research project, the researcher made an effort to have representation from different classrooms. This was the only criterion for the purposeful sampling. The researcher observed the teachers' classrooms, and conducted one-on-one interviews and a focus group.

Access

Access to the Eastnorth Children's Center was obtained after discussing this research project with its Early Childhood Director. This contact with the preschool was established based on its community partnership with Loyola Marymount University. The Early Childhood Director of Eastnorth Children's Center preschool program wrote a letter authorizing the researcher to conduct this study at this site. At the time of data collection, the researcher was a preschool teacher and preschool curriculum coordinator who hoped to bond with the preschool teachers in order to ensure their trust and, in return, their participation in the study.

Methods of Data Collection

The researcher must choose what type of data to collect to better aid in answering the specific questions (Merriam, 1998). In this case, to gain an accurate account of preschool teachers' experiences, the following methods of data collection were used: observations,

interviews, a focus group, and analyses of documents. The data were collected between November 2014 and April 2015.

Observations

Preschool classroom observations took place in six preschool teachers' classrooms. Observational data can offer a firsthand account of the phenomenon of interest to qualitative researchers (Merriam, 1998). To avoid bias, ethnographic field notes that represent reality versus what the researcher imagines occurred were used. As Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) stated:

Writing ethnographic field notes that are sensitive to members' meanings is primarily a matter not of asking but of inferring what people are concerned with from the specific ways in which they talk and act in a variety of natural settings. (p. 140)

Observations took place during the first week of the fieldwork. Each observation took place for the entire day from 7:30 in the morning to 4:30 in the afternoon. The younger preschoolers were observed on a Monday, the older preschoolers were observed on a Wednesday, and the middle preschoolers were observed on a Friday.

The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS), a reliable and valid self-evaluation tool, was used to inform the observation protocol because it is an indicator of quality that comprises what is known as a "whole child development curricula." The revised edition includes 43 items organized into seven areas that are expressed in a Likert-type scale with a score of 1 corresponding to *inadequate* and a score of 7 corresponding to *excellent*. The observations focused on the following aspects:

1. Space and furnishing,
2. Personal care routines,
3. Language-reasoning,
4. Activities (related to the development of the whole child),
5. Interaction,
6. Program structure, and
7. Parents and staff. (Espinosa, 2002)

The researcher also observed interactions between parents and teachers in order to see if these interactions impacted teachers' practices and pedagogy in the classroom. Furthermore, the principal researcher observed potential support systems that preschool teachers deemed fundamental to implementing a whole child development curriculum in their classrooms.

Interviews

The six face-to-face and one-on-one interviews allowed for deeper insight as well as clarification on anything that was noticed during the observations. Interviews were more personal and really allowed for each individual teacher to have a unique voice (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Interviews took place outside the preschool and were semistructured with open-ended questions, such as:

1. Why do you think the development of the whole child is important in preschool?
2. What is the policy of the preschool in terms of curriculum? What does it require you to teach?
3. What do you do in your classroom to support a whole child development curriculum approach?

4. What do you find is the most challenging aspect of implementing a whole child development curriculum approach?
5. What is the most rewarding aspect of implementing a whole child development curriculum approach?
6. What support systems do you have in place that help you implement a whole child development curriculum approach?

The conversations were documented through notes and audio recordings using a smart phone with a voice notes application. The researcher interviewed six teachers one time for one hour each. In some cases, there were follow-up interviews to delve more deeply into some participants' understandings and to receive feedback on their responses. Additionally, the interview recordings were transcribed and analyzed.

Focus Group

The focus group allowed a group of preschool teachers to come together and share their overall ideas with one another. Focus groups are important because they can supplement necessary information (Hatch, 2002). The focus group consisted of four out of the six preschool teachers who were observed and interviewed. The focus group discussion was documented through notes and an audio recording using a smart phone with a voice notes application. The focus group took place outside of the preschool premises. This focus group data collection was completed in one day.

Documents

In addition, documents pertaining to a whole child development curriculum approach were used, such as the schedule of the day, the weekly curriculum lesson plan, and children’s individual binders. These materials were reviewed on-site during the classroom observations.

Table 1

Research Design

Research Questions	Data Source	Methods of Data Collection
1. How do preschool teachers articulate the pressure they face from parents and other stakeholders to teach more academics when implementing a whole child development curriculum?	Six selected preschool teachers	Interviews
	Four selected preschool teachers	Focus group
2. How do preschool teachers articulate the impact of this pressure on their actual practice and pedagogy in an urban, public preschool?	Six selected preschool teachers	Interviews
	Four selected preschool teachers	Focus group
	Classrooms of six selected preschool teachers	Classroom observations
	Lesson plans; schedule of the day; children’s binders	Analyses of documents
3. What are the support systems that preschool teachers deem fundamental to implement a whole child development curriculum in light of pressure at an urban, public preschool?	Six selected preschool teachers	Interviews
	Classrooms of six selected preschool teachers	Classroom observations
	Lesson plans; schedule of the day; children’s binders	Analyses of documents

Methods of Data Analysis

Unlike quantitative data that are analyzed by statistical significance, qualitative data are read, reread, coded, and organized into domains. This analysis is also known as inductive, whereby patterns create connections, which generate general statements about the phenomena being investigated (Hatch, 2002), in this case preschool teachers' experiences when implementing a whole child development curriculum approach. All of this is created through the rich collection of various forms of data with the goal to find emerging themes. In this case of the present study, once the themes were recognized through the triangulation of data, evidence supporting or contradicting these themes were grouped for further analysis.

The first step, however, was to transcribe the data as they were collected. After the data were transcribed, the researcher read and organized them. Once this step was completed, the data were coded. Once the data were coded, a preliminary analysis was necessary in order to create a description and generate themes. A discussion of interconnecting themes was then generated before making an interpretation (Creswell, 2014).

Criteria of Trustworthiness

Merriam (1998) spoke of three criteria that determine the quality and worth of a qualitative study: credibility, transferability, and dependability. Credibility refers to the internal validity. Transferability indicates the congruence with others' experiences. Dependability reveals the internal consistency of data and the process of obtaining that data. If these criteria are explored, a qualitative case study can be deemed trustworthy.

Credibility

Merriam (1998) wrote, “Credibility is internal validity [and] deals with the question of how research findings match reality” (p. 201). In this study, the credibility question was: Did the interviews and the field notes that I, as the researcher, gathered truly depict the perceptions of the participants? For this reason, multiple data sources were necessary to secure an authentic representation of teacher perspectives. Reflective field notes were used to bring awareness of any assumptions, theoretical frameworks, and personal perspectives that may expose my biases and, in retrospect, affect the findings of the study.

Transferability

Merriam (1998) wrote of transferability as a “naturalistic generalization” and “reader or user generalizability” to those in and with similar situations and experiences. In order to attain this external validity, three strategies must be present: rich, thick description; typicality or modal category; and multiple designs when possible (Merriam, 1998). The principal researcher collected data in detail and performed a cross-case analysis to detect commonalities and patterns in the teachers’ experiences.

Dependability

Merriam (1998) referred to dependability as the internal reliability of qualitative data analysis by ensuring two techniques: investigator’s position and triangulation. Investigator’s position refers to the researcher’s ability and capacity to be forthright and clear about the study. For this reason, the researcher decided to collect the data at a different preschool from where she was employed. Triangulation refers to the use of multiple methods of data collection and analysis.

Conclusion

By using a qualitative study with a case study design, this study sought to explore preschool teachers' experiences with parents and other stakeholders when implementing a whole child development curriculum approach and the support systems they deem fundamental to staying true to their training and the school's philosophy. Various types of qualitative data were analyzed through an inductive process to uncover emerging themes. However, these themes may be difficult to generalize to other urban public preschools with a whole child development curriculum approach. This study took place in the greater Los Angeles area where the student population was mostly Latino/a and may reflect different demographics than other urban public preschools, even though the largest student population in Los Angeles is 64.6% Latino/a (www.kidsdata.org). Furthermore, all of the preschool teachers that participated in the study were highly educated in comparison to the national average in the field of ECE, where only 19% of educators hold a bachelor's degree or more (www.naeyc.com).

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

Restatement of the Purpose of the Study

This qualitative case study of teachers at an urban public preschool sought to gain a deeper understanding of the pressure that public preschool teachers face from parents and other stakeholders to offer more academics in a preschool that implements a whole child development curriculum approach. This study uncovered how the pressure impacts the quality of teaching in their classrooms as well as how teachers reconcile what they know about child development and what is being asked of them from stakeholders that may or may not understand what an Early Childhood Education (ECE) entails. It was also imperative to understand what support systems preschool teachers deem fundamental to help them implement a whole child development curriculum approach in light of pressure from parents and other stakeholders for more academics. These concepts were explored through observations, interviews, a focus group, and analyses of documents. These preschool teachers' experiences offered insight into their daily work with young children and how current national public policies and the growing interest in ECE truly impact their classrooms on a daily basis.

Research Questions

The research questions that drove this study were:

1. How do preschool teachers articulate the pressure they face from parents and other stakeholders to teach more academics when implementing a whole child development curriculum in an urban public preschool?

2. How do preschool teachers articulate the impact of this pressure on their actual practice and pedagogy in an urban public preschool?
3. What are the support systems that preschool teachers deem fundamental to implement a whole child development curriculum in light of pressure at an urban public preschool?

Context of the Study

Setting

Eastnorth Children's Center preschool program was described in detail in Chapter 3.

Participants

This study looked at the pressure that preschool teachers face to become more academic in their classrooms and the support systems they need to continue to foster the development of the whole child. Six out of a total of nine different Eastnorth preschool teachers participated in this study. All of these teachers were observed in their classrooms and interviewed. Three of these teachers participated in follow-up interviews in relation to their participation in Teach for America (TFA), a nonprofit organization whose mission is to eliminate educational inequity by enlisting high-achieving recent college graduates and professionals to teach for at least two years in low-income communities throughout the United States (www.teachforamerica.org). Four out of the six teachers interviewed participated in a focus group.

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Participation	Race/Ethnicity	Education	Experience	Training
Lourdes (Female)	23	Observation, Interview, Follow-Up, and Focus Group	Caucasian	M.A. in Elementary Ed.	18 months	TFA/K-5
Alice (Female)	24	Observation, Interview, and Focus Group	Hispanic	B.A. in Psychology	18 months	ECE
Aaron (Male)	31	Observation, Interview, and Follow-Up	Hispanic	M.A. in ECE	18 months	TFA/ECE
TJ (Female)	24	Observation, Interview, and Focus Group	Asian	M.A. in ECE	30 months	ECE
Juan (Male)	31	Observation, Interview, Follow-Up, and Focus Group	Hispanic	M.A. in Ed. Equity SJ & M.A. in Elementary Ed.	16 months	TFA/K-5
Cathy (Female)	30	Observation and Interview	Hispanic	M.A. in ECE	18 months	ECE

Summary of Key Findings

The preschool teachers at the Eastnorth Children Center all believed in the importance of the development of the whole child from the social to the emotional to the physical to the linguistic to the cognitive. However, they differed in their views of the purpose of the whole child developmental curriculum approach, as well as in their ability to implement it in their classrooms based on their training. Furthermore, these preschool teachers believed that national public policies have had an impact on the ECE field, especially on what parents expect from their child’s preschool experience. Lastly, they all agreed that different types of support systems are necessary to help them become better teachers and advocates in the field of ECE.

The Research Process

Access

Access to the Eastnorth Children's Center was obtained after discussing this research project with its Early Childhood Director. This contact with the preschool was established based on its community partnership with Loyola Marymount University. The director of Eastnorth Children's Center wrote a letter authorizing the researcher to conduct this study at this particular site.

Participant Selection

The participants in this research were six out of the nine preschool teachers employed at Eastnorth Children's Center preschool program. All of their real names were changed into pseudonyms. This case study employed a convenient and purposeful sampling to select the preschool teachers at this school. The researcher asked the Early Education Director, who oversaw the preschool teachers, curriculum development, and professional development to provide the names and emails of all nine teachers. The researcher then sent emails to all of them requesting their participation in the research project. Once the preschool teachers volunteered to participate in this research project, there was an effort to make sure that there was representation from each classroom, which was the case. This was the only criterion for the purposeful sampling. Two out of the three teachers from each classroom agreed to observations and interviews. Four out of these six teachers then agreed to a focus group.

Data Collection

Observations. The researcher observed three preschool classrooms in a one-week period during the month of November 2014. Each observation lasted eight hours. The researcher

observed Juan and Cathy's classroom first (the youngest preschoolers), Lourdes and Alice's classroom second (the oldest preschoolers), and Aaron and TJ's classroom last (the middle preschoolers). The researcher used the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) tool to inform the observation protocol because it is an indicator of quality that comprises the development of the whole child. The researcher also looked for interactions between parents and teachers to see if any had an impact on teachers' practices and pedagogy in the classroom. Furthermore, the researcher focused on support systems that preschool teachers might need to implement a whole child development curriculum approach in their classrooms.

Interviews. The researcher interviewed three preschool teachers in November 2014, two in December 2014, and one in January 2015. All participants were current preschool teachers at Eastnorth Children's Center at the time of their interviews. Interviews were held outside of the Eastnorth Children's Center facility and were scheduled at the convenience of each participant. Each interview was scheduled for one hour, but some lasted 45 minutes. The researcher used an interview protocol to guide the conversations. All of the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

Follow-up interviews. The researcher conducted follow-up interviews with three of the six preschool teachers based on their current participation for Teach for America (TFA). These interviews took place at the end of January 2015 and the beginning of February 2015. Once again, these interviews were held outside the Eastnorth Children's Center facility and were scheduled at the convenience of each participant. The researcher used the following interview protocol to guide the conversations:

1. How long was your training at TFA?
2. What kind of books/articles did you read through TFA to support you in your role as a preschool teacher?
3. How does the TFA philosophy contradict Eastnorth Children's Center philosophy, if it does?
4. How were you placed at this particular center?
5. What was your overall experience being in TFA? Is there any room for improvement for the organization?

All of the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

Documents. Documents pertaining to a whole child development curriculum approach, such as the schedule of the day, the weekly curriculum lesson plan, and children's individual binders, were reviewed on-site during the classroom observations.

Focus group. Four out of the six preschool teachers who were originally observed and interviewed took part in a one-hour focus group. The focus group took place after all of the other data were coded and analyzed. The researcher used the following focus group protocol to guide the conversation:

1. How would you define academics?
2. Why are academics so important?
3. Are academics and the development of the whole child mutually exclusive?
4. What do you believe are contributing factors to differences seen in preschool classrooms when it comes to the implementation of a whole child development curriculum approach?

5. What does the future of ECE look like to you and why?
6. What is the overall purpose of education?

Data Analysis

Observations. Field notes were created from each observation. The researcher read and reviewed the field notes several times. They were also coded for themes by hand. These themes were then combined with the themes that emerged from the interviews.

Interviews. Data analysis was ongoing throughout the data collection process. After each interview, the researcher listened to the audio recording and took notes on emerging themes. All of the interview transcripts were read and reviewed by the researcher several times. They were also coded for themes by hand. Themes emerged that were then used to create questions for the focus group.

Follow-up interviews. Data analysis was ongoing throughout the data collection process. After each interview the researcher listened to the audio recording and took notes on emerging themes. All of the interview transcripts were read and reviewed by the researcher several times. They were also coded for themes by hand.

Documents. All of the documents, the schedule of the day, the weekly curriculum lesson plan, and the children's individual binders, were created based on the Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP), a teacher observation tool for children's learning along a continuum developed by the California Department of Education for young children.

Focus group. The researcher listened to the focus group audio recording, took notes, and transcribed the conversation by hand. The transcript was then read and reviewed by the

researcher and themes were coded by hand. The focus group served the purpose of triangulating the data in order to create validity for the study.

Reflections on the Research Process

The preschool teachers that participated in this study felt a sense of empowerment, had the opportunity to reflect on their practices, and were able to engage in meaningful dialogue with their colleagues. The preschool teachers were excited to know that someone would take interest in their everyday workday in order to help them and that their voices would be heard. Also, they were pleased that this process was not only going to last a few minutes, but it was going to last a few months in order to allow for a deep understanding of their experiences. The commitment from the researcher allowed the opportunity to create a safe space for honest interactions. There was also a sense of pride that they were taking part in something bigger in the name of the ECE field. Many teachers reported that this was the first time anyone took the time to observe them and talk to them about many of the struggles they face and they hoped that this would not be the last time because they really enjoyed feeling a sense of community. The focus group allowed the researcher to move beyond the research questions and address other major concerns such as the lack of respect and compensation given to preschool teachers along with many other obstacles preschool teachers must overcome in order to do their jobs well.

Themes Emerging from the Data

Seven themes emerged through an inductive analysis of the data. These themes tell the story of six urban public preschool teachers' experiences and perceptions about the demands for more academics in their preschool classrooms. The seven themes were:

1. Theory not practice
2. All about the end goal
3. Case-by-case implementation
4. Teacher training matters
5. Education reforms and national public policies matter
6. Preschool parents' goals for their children
7. Support systems are a necessity

The Development of the Whole Child: Past, Present, and Future

The field of ECE was founded on the basis of humanist tradition, “a system of thought that reflects concern for the values, potential, well-being, and interests of human beings” (Feeney et al., 2010, p. 8), focusing on the development of the whole child. However, more recently, this tradition has been challenged by the urgency of accountability in the public education system through testing academic content. Preschools are becoming more academic, and children and teachers are left to make sense of this current shift, which may result in the creation of a new ECE curriculum approach that may be more detrimental than beneficial for the future of our society.

Theme 1: Theory not practice

As the researcher, I was very excited to observe and interact with other preschool teachers like myself. Many times this is not possible and as educators we often times feel that what we do and experience in our classrooms is unique to us. However, when I walked into Eastnorth Children's Center preschool program, the first thing I noticed was a group of children in a big outdoor space getting ready to do some gardening, which excited and amazed me. As I

continued my observations throughout the week in all of the preschool classrooms, I noticed a whole child development curriculum approach in action—from family-style meals to caring for the classroom to brushing teeth and washing hands to discussions about safety, inclusion of others, home experiences, and life skills. For example, before the start of lunchtime, each preschool classroom chanted, “Let the feast begin!” In the older preschool classroom, the teachers even dimmed the lights and placed electric candles on top of the tables to replicate a fancy dining experience.

These observations allowed me to see whether or not there were disparities between the goals of the center and the teachers’ practices, the pressure the teachers described from the parents and how that impacted their pedagogy, and the support systems that are needed to implement a whole child development curriculum approach. During these observations I had the opportunity to analyze the schedule of the day, the weekly curriculum lesson plan, and the children’s individual binders across classrooms. These documents and my observations of the classrooms with the ECERS tool helped to confirm the implementation of a whole child development curriculum approach. For example, all of the documents were consistent across all preschool classrooms. The schedules of the day mirrored one another and were followed as seen in the observations. The weekly curriculum lesson plan and children’s individual binders focused on all developmental domains: physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and linguistic. Furthermore, all of the preschool classrooms included a reading area, a dramatic play area, a math and science area, an art area, a block area, and a manipulative area. All classrooms shared the outdoor space, which included a climbing structure, a grassy area, a sand area, a tricycle area, a reading area, a water area, and a digging area. Also, all of the classrooms engaged in personal

care routines and interactions. However, even though all of the classrooms engaged in activities throughout the day, there were differences in how they were implemented based on the teachers in the classrooms, which was also not consistent with what was described on the weekly curriculum lesson plan.

All of the TFA teachers from the study were in different classrooms and were paired with one of the non-TFA teachers from the study, which created an interesting dynamic in the classrooms. For example, in the middle preschoolers' classroom, there were many instances of academic instruction. During circle time, the TFA teacher was going to read a book to the children and introduced them to the author and illustrator. The TFA teacher proceeded to ask, "How many syllables are in the word 'illustrator'?" As the TFA teacher read the book, there were moments where the book was stopped to emphasize different letters, such as, "F is for frustrated." Another instance of academic instruction was during the transition from an art activity to lunchtime. The children gathered around a computer and sang a song about the sounds of the letters. Each child then had the opportunity to identify the letter that appeared on the computer before washing hands for lunch. These discrepancies among the teachers and among the classrooms matched what the teachers had to say individually and in the focus group about a whole child development curriculum approach, as seen in Juan's response:

Yeah, I feel like at our center it varies from classroom to classroom. And like the mission of the whole school is whole child. Every classroom is completely different and some teachers push solely social-emotional skills. Some teachers push both. Some teachers push social-emotional at the beginning and then academics at the end. Just every classroom is so different, just from talking to teachers. I've never actually [gone]

in and [seen] what it looks like for the whole year. But yeah, you can tell that people have different ideas about different philosophies.

Aaron went a step further and provided a concrete example:

I have a child that has a little sister in another classroom and she's smart . . . she can count to 100 . . . [but] the older sister can't. So the dad, like in the parent conference, is like, "Well, why can the little one count to 100?" And I guess in that class they do a lot of rote memorization, a lot of counting.

What the teachers think of the preschool's curriculum. All of the teachers described their curriculum as child-centered and emergent with an emphasis on the development of the whole child. However, they use the whole child development curriculum as a medium to teach academics. For example, Lourdes, a TFA preschool teacher in the older preschool classroom said, "It's very much following the kids' interests, whatever they're really interested in—like space or bugs." Aaron, a teacher in the middle preschool classroom, shared a similar sentiment, "It's child-driven. It's like, okay, what are your kids into? They like trains? Okay, let's talk about trains. And we can talk about it for one day or two months. If they're into it, they're into it." Aaron further explained how these children's interests allow for the development of the whole child:

It's not just, let's learn facts about trains or let's learn that "train" starts with "t" and this is how you spell it. It's like, okay, let's learn about trains. Let's build a train station, and use that dramatic play to learn how to take turns, and let's learn about transportation, and the importance of it. Let's bring it back to your life, "How do you get to school? Is it the bus? Okay, you take the bus."

The need for developmentally appropriate practices. A whole child development curriculum approach focuses on the social, emotional, physical, linguistic, and cognitive domains. However, in order to support children's learning in all of these areas, especially in terms of cognitive abilities, developmentally appropriate practices must be used, as voiced by Lourdes, one of the TFA teachers:

Once you see what the children are interested in, you create activities based off that. It's almost like disguising the learning. For example, with the exploration of bugs in my classroom, we started out with earthworms, then snails, and moved into ants. We did tons of measuring and math, and science, but the kids just thought they were playing with the bugs.

Furthermore, Juan, another TFA teacher in the younger preschool classroom, described how his goals for the children were engagement and persistence, but instead of expecting them to sit for long periods of time doing meaningless activities, he supported the children's explorations:

For example, if a child wants to string beads, but the yarn is too difficult, I help them find an alternative material like a pipe cleaner. I allow them to reach a certain level of frustration before I scaffold them.

He also mentioned the importance of routines in the classroom that are consistent because they allow the children to become familiar with the schedule and anticipate what is going to happen next. This sentiment was echoed in Alice's opinion, a non-TFA teacher in the older preschool classroom:

A classroom community helps the children in making sure that it's a safe environment for them to develop . . . feel that they'll be supported and are able to ask questions, have conversations, or ask for help. This supports the whole child.

Cathy, a non-TFA teacher in the younger preschool classroom also mentioned how a sense of belonging, socialization, and developmentally appropriate practices such as “play and hands-on experiences allow the children to learn.”

Academics as part of a whole child development curriculum approach. All of the teachers believed that there is a time and place for academics in preschool, but they differed when it came to the importance of it. For example, Lourdes, Juan, and Aaron were part of TFA, a nonprofit organization, which was described by Aaron as “closing the education gap before it starts” as its main goal. Juan agreed:

Teach for America pushes for rigorous content, but I enjoy teaching content. And I think when done in a certain way, you can push a lot of content . . . because I feel if we didn't push some academic content, we would be doing a lot of arts and crafts.

This view however, was not shared by TJ, a non-TFA teacher in the middle preschool classroom with an ECE Master's degree:

I think it depends on if the children are interested in it, and if they are then I'm okay with that, but I don't feel like it's necessary to teach them a lot of academics at such a young age when they have the rest of their educational experience to learn about it.

Cathy, also non-TFA, who has an ECE Master's degree spoke to this point:

Curriculum in preschool should be about the development of the whole child. This approach does not require me to teach academics, but this does not mean that the children do not learn academics, but this is more a by-product than direct results.

The teachers differed not only in the importance of academics, but also in their definition of academics as discussed in the focus group. The biggest disagreement was whether certain content was too academic or whether the implementation of certain content was considered too academic. For example, Lourdes, a TFA teacher, described academics as “anything related to a core subject. So like reading, writing, math . . . including pre-literacy skills and pre-math skills.” However, Aaron, a TFA teacher as well, but with an ECE background, disagreed with Lourdes, “I feel that in preschool we work on pre-literacy skills and math concepts and academic[s] kind of takes it more towards knowing your letters, writing your name . . . learning the syllables.”

Long-term and meaningful learning of the children associated directly to a whole child development curriculum approach. The preschool teachers were aware that there are many advantages to the development of the whole child including the children's ability to transfer different types of knowledge into new situations, as described by Lourdes:

It's like light bulb moments. When they're super excited about something and they learn a new vocabulary word, or they learn some new concept and they just keep talking about it. And they just share it to whoever, and then two months down the road you'll see something related to that and they'll be like, oh well did you know, and share the knowledge that they learned months prior . . . they gain so much more out of it and it really sticks with them.

Aaron, also shared this experience, based on his children's interest on trains:

One of the coolest things they learned about trains that still works to this day-they learned a year ago-is that when you ride the tricycles, you need to take turns. So the issue was transportation on trains, so they ride twice around the track, and then they wait at the bus stop. And they have completely embraced the idea of, "I'm standing here at the bus stop. They're gonna take turns. I'm gonna get off, give my helmet to the next kid, and they're gonna go." So it's the whole child, where you're teaching every single skill they need to be a functioning child.

Cathy went a step further and described this type of learning as intrinsic, which she believed helped her children stay engaged and motivated for longer periods of time. Furthermore, "the children have a voice. They are able to share their ideas and questions."

Theme 2: All About the End Goal

Even though all of the teachers were on board with the development of the whole child as a curriculum approach, once again their reasoning behind it differed based on what they thought was the main goal.

Social and emotional development at the foundation of ECE. All of the teachers agreed that without social and emotional development in children, nothing else was possible. However, for Juan, who recently completed his Master's degree in elementary education, social and emotional development was an end goal rather than a process, "Once we work on their social-emotional development, we can teach a lot of content once we got that under control."

Aaron, one of the TFA teachers, felt the same way:

I quickly realized that they don't need to count to 100 at three years old. And they don't

need to know how to spell their name. But what they do need to do is know how to tell you when they're upset . . . to know how to find a way where they can regulate themselves. Only then can I teach academic content.

The preschool teachers that did not participate in TFA felt differently. They saw social and emotional development as a lifelong process. For example, Alice, who has a background in ECE was aware that a preschool setting might be the first time that many children are interacting with others outside their immediate family, "Preschool is a time for them to really focus on their social emotional skills, self-regulation emotions, the way they interact with other people . . . they're building their schemas of how people interact with them, their theories of the world."

Children's individual differences and age. For most of the teachers, age did not determine social and emotional maturity. For example, Lourdes explained, "I think it's really just kind of taking into account each and every student and not necessarily saying like, 'All right, just because these students are four, they're automatically ready for this level of academics.'" Juan, on the other hand believed that social and emotional development was more systematic. For example, he thought that younger preschoolers require more social and emotional development while older preschoolers need more "academics. Numbers, letters, critical thinking, shapes-you know, everything that they're gonna need for kindergarten." TJ, who had a Master's degree in ECE counter-argued the previous point:

It does not matter if you are getting ready to go to kindergarten or not. We need to focus on socialization or they're going to have trouble in school. They're not going to be able to focus academically in class if they're struggling in other aspects of their development. We must focus on a holistic approach. It is beneficial to the children academically

because other aspects are being addressed as well.

This sentiment was echoed by Aaron during the focus group, “One thing I don’t get is kids don’t just magically become more ready at five years old. Like you turn five and it’s not like a switch hits.” This comment led to a very thought provoking question from Juan, which filled the room with silence, “And what happens to those kids who don’t go to preschool and are dropped into kindergarten?” After a good while, Lourdes responded, “I would personally like kindergarten curriculum to change rather than ECE . . . become adapted to k-12 because it’s not appropriate for children, but I’d like it if kinder . . . became more whole child focused.”

Social and emotional development must precede academics, and it must be done through developmentally appropriate practices. Lourdes, one of the TFA teachers, believed that once social and emotional aspects are mastered, children “are able to focus, they’re absolutely ready for academics. They want to start reading. They want to start learning more about letters and learning more about counting and math and they’re sort of ready for that challenge.” However, this did not mean that Lourdes believed it should be done in a developmentally inappropriate manner, “It still shouldn’t be giving them flash cards or making them do tons and tons of worksheets or copying letter after letter.” Instead Lourdes proposed, “Writing letters in paint or in sand as a sensory experience and in different manners.” Aaron, another TFA teacher, also took this stance, “When I teach academic content, I’m always teaching as a whole child. Like right now I’m teaching the scientific method by helping the children problem-solve conflicts.” Aaron also emphasized that academic content required critical thinking and not “let’s sit down and let’s learn rote memorization of how to spell this word, what does this sound, letter make?”

Alice and Cathy, two of the preschool teachers that were not as preoccupied with academics, agreed that it is more about the approach than the actual academic content, for example, Alice said, “I don’t say I’m completely opposed to it [academics], but I just think that the way it’s approached is more of the issue and just making sure that it’s developmentally appropriate at the point that they are.” Cathy put it into simple short words, “I think there is a place and time for it. There is also a particular way of doing it.” These themes emerged once again during the focus group. For example, Lourdes and Aaron, two out of the three TFA teachers talked about the importance of fostering social and emotional development in order to achieve academic success:

I currently have a student whose older sister was like almost reading by the time she finished preschool. And the one . . . who’s in my class is very . . . socially, emotionally strong. And . . . now that the balance is there . . . she’ll start reading, but she had to build the social-emotional first.

For this reason, Aaron expressed his support for transitional kindergarten (TK):

I always recommend to parents that TK would be the best choice for most of them, because we . . . focus . . . on social-emotional, that TK is going to kind of bridge that [with] kindergarten readiness in a more academic sense.

The approach taken toward academics was not the only thing that worried the teachers, but also how to implement a whole child development curriculum approach to an entire classroom.

Theme 3: Case-by-Case Implementation

As seen previously, some teachers viewed the development of the whole child, specifically the social and emotional domains, as a medium for teaching more academics. This

meant that often times this particular curriculum approach was implemented case by case, as expressed by Lourdes, who like Juan, had her Master's degree in elementary education and was part of TFA, "I think you have to take it child by child." There was the mentality that not all children need a whole child development curriculum approach. However, there were other reasons to prefer a case-by-case approach, as shared by Lourdes, such as "creating something that's interesting for each child. Especially when we have more than 15 children. Sometimes half the class is really interested in something and then the other half just kind of has a random interest." Furthermore, Lourdes explained how even when children are similar in age they may be in different places developmentally, "Figuring out ways to balance the different children's abilities can be sometimes a challenge. It's okay where both of them are, but I have to figure out how to teach them and engage them."

Aaron, one of the TFA teachers, proposed the importance of building relationships with the children to get to know them better, "My personal philosophy of an inexperienced teacher, less than two years' experience . . . a relationship with a child is gonna do a lot more than having a perfectly-run classroom." However, Aaron admitted that trying to do this with 16 children is hard. Juan nevertheless attempted to do the same with the children in his classroom, "A lot of the things that I do is one-on-one, one-on-one support-when they're having difficulties, when they're having tantrums, when they're crying, when a friend hurts their feelings." He also admitted, though, "But where I'm having difficulty is doing that for the whole group. And so I don't know how to do that. And I'm trying different strategies to learn those techniques." Juan further commented that this struggle stemmed from the differences in temperaments among the

children and between him and the children. This feeling resonated with Alice, a non-TFA teacher:

You have to remember that you are not catering to just one child. There are several of them, and all of them have different needs and are in different places. Just finding the medium between helping that one child that really needs help and then also keeping the other ones interested. For example, how do you follow through with one child specifically when you're reading a story to everybody?

As the researcher, I felt that these preschool teachers' group sizes were small, yet for the less experienced teachers, based on their educational background, 16 children is more than enough at times.

Theme 4: Teacher Training Matters

Three out of the six teachers interviewed for this research project had a Master's degree in ECE. The other two had a Master's degree in elementary education, and the other one had a Bachelor's degree in psychology. Three out of these six teachers were trained by TFA, and each one of them was in a different classroom. Five out of the six teachers had less than a year-and-a-half experience as preschool teachers.

As the researcher, once I analyzed all of the data, I realized that the two TFA preschool teachers with an elementary education background favored a more academic curriculum and looked at the whole child development curriculum approach as a strategy to support academic content. For example, in the beginning of her teaching career, Lourdes was ready to push for content:

In the world of ECE you're talking [about] ways that we can try to prevent the [achievement] gap from even forming. We're like close it before it even starts. When I first started preschool I thought that was going to happen through teaching my kids how to read all their numbers, count to 100, and teaching them academics, and now I definitely fully understand that the best way to help them close that gap before it begins is absolutely by focusing on that social emotional. When they're ready, then absolutely they can learn.

During a follow-up interview with Lourdes about TFA, she said she had a five-week training called Institute during the summer where the mornings were spent teaching in the classroom and the afternoons were filled with various workshops. She also attended monthly professional development days after the Institute throughout the year that included mindfulness training, professional learning communities, and topics on diversity, equity, and inclusiveness. Her feedback on TFA was similar to what her TFA colleagues, Juan and Aaron, stated, "TFA has a strong philosophy about collecting data and utilize it to inform practice. Apart from the Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP), Eastnorth Children's Center does not allow formal assessments." When Aaron described the curriculum at Eastnorth Children's Center during the first interview, he mentioned, "There's really no push for academic content [at the preschool program]. They say we can't test the kids. That's one thing that I've been told we can't do."

In 2006, TFA launched its ECE initiative nationwide and teachers like Lourdes, Aaron, and Juan became part of this movement. One sentiment that Aaron and Juan shared was their awareness of external factors outside of school that can have an impact on the children they serve, for example, Aaron shared:

I have an affinity for the community I'm working with, for low-income Latino families. I grew up in a low-income Latino family. So I kind of relate to some of the struggles and some of the difficulties that they might be facing. And as a child, knowing that it's extremely important to have a strong start in school.

Juan took it a step further and focused on the impact it has on the parents because after all the children are part of a family unit, "I like to see life through their lens, to know what it's like to grow up in a low-income neighborhood, to see-you know, what happens outside of the classroom affects what happens inside of the classroom."

The non-TFA teachers described a different training experience mostly based on their ECE education background, which included observations and student teaching. For example, TJ described, "I think that being able to observe teachers, for like over two weeks, see what other teachers are doing really helped me to gain a deeper understanding of a whole child development curriculum approach." According to Aaron, one of the major differences between TFA and non-TFA teachers was that TFA preschool teachers were trained by their teacher educators with a kindergarten–12 background who had a more top-down academic approach, rather than by ECE educators. This was not the case for Alice, a non-TFA teacher:

I've been lucky that my training and education are very much in line with the center's philosophy and that I'm in a supportive environment where I feel everybody is pretty much on the same page as to how to support the whole child.

Cathy, a non-TFA teacher, felt the same way, "Their [the center's] philosophy is in line with the whole child development curriculum approach." Unfortunately, not all training focuses on the development of the whole child nor do all preschools abide by this principle, mostly because of

education reforms and national public policies. For example, during the focus group, Juan alluded to this point:

I mean, we have to do our best within the system we're given. This is the game we have to play right now. That's not going to change for these kids, for like our group, so we have to get them ready for what's next. I wish that wasn't the case, but that's what we have to do.

Theme 5: Education Reforms and National Public Policies Matter

All of the teachers felt pressure to get children ready for kindergarten regardless of whether they were working with the younger preschoolers or the older preschoolers. For example, Lourdes, a TFA teacher, explained:

There's a lot of push down. What kids are expected to know in first grade they're now expected to have in kindergarten. What was kindergarten is now preschool. I think that's really hard. Because I think people coming from more of a child development background, coming from the preschool going up are saying wait, wait, wait. You can't press that down. We need to teach all these foundations first.

Aaron, another TFA teacher, echoed a similar sentiment and believed that neither NCLB nor Race to the Top (RTT) had an impact on ECE teachers' training, curriculum, and expectations, nor did the Common Core State Standards Initiative:

We gotta teach them everything they need to know to be successful, and that's getting pushed into preschool. It's impacting the field. And that's affecting it. Because if you have centers that are really pushing for that, then you lose the focus of the whole child.

Alice also had her own opinion about the Common Core, "You're more worried about following

the rules or following the guidelines and you're not really seeing if it's aligning with how you need to help the child and there's a problem there." Aaron also believed that these reforms created another type of conflict because children needed to have a basic understanding of their emotions and peer relationships:

In our society, we're really pushing education as the key to success. In kindergarten-12 the children are not being assessed [as an individual], but [instead] their test scores [are being assessed] and here we are [in ECE] assessing the whole child on the DRDP, across multiple domains of development. This is a huge disconnect.

Juan, another TFA teacher, felt torn with all of the different demands and expectations and his personal values, "There is a conflict. Because we have kids who are going to kindergarten and it's like, yes, I want my children to enjoy being children . . . but they are required to be ready for kindergarten." Juan asked himself the following questions aloud:

Am I doing them a disservice by not teaching some content? Or is that wrong? Should I teach purely social-emotional development, and they'll be ready on their own for what comes next? Are we doing what's best for our kids right now? 'Cause they're going to kindergarten. That's the next step. Are they gonna be ready for it?

Even though TJ, a non-TFA teacher, alluded to the point that education reforms might have good intentions, "they're still putting a lot of pressure on children to be ready for grade school. This is not a holistic approach." These approaches to ECE show a conflict with what the research says young children need, and Aaron believed he knew why, "The people making policies aren't experts in the field of ECE. They're policy writers. The research doesn't affect necessarily what policies are being written." This discussion about the current education reform and national

policies continued during the focus group. For example, Alice made a comment similar to Aaron's previous comment, "The policymakers [need] to understand what's going on and what needs to happen before they can push academics and funding and all this other stuff that the kids don't even need to be pressured about."

There were also many suggestions about how to improve the field of ECE. First, the field needs to become more professional and respectable, according to Juan, "It's such a hard job . . . parents are putting their trust in us to help their children . . . and I don't think that we get the credit that we deserve." Then, the field of ECE must continue to strive for teachers with higher education through a credentialing program, according to Aaron, "We're going to have qualified teachers that are actually learning child development background." In this entire equation, everyone needs to be educated, including parents, according to Alice, "To be able to engage, not only within the teachers, but also with the parents about what's going on." Many parents were, unfortunately, misinformed, as TJ pointed out, "I know more parents are wanting their kids to go to TK, because they're like maybe they need to go to TK before . . . kindergarten, when it's really just an option." The conflict about what curriculum approach to implement with children did not only affect teachers, but it manifested itself as well through parents according to the teachers' experiences.

Theme 6: Preschool Parents' Goals for Their Children

The teachers at Eastnorth Children's Center preschool program felt that the parents at their site had mixed opinions about a whole child development curriculum approach because, like them, they were also influenced by national trends for more academics, as described by Juan:

I think it changes the mentality of our parents, the expectations of our parents, and now the expectations that they have of their children, especially of our children who have older siblings. Because they know that kindergarten is not what it used to be.

For this reason, the teachers met with the parents as a group at the beginning of the year. Juan, one of the TFA teachers, recounted how many of the questions he was asked revolved around kindergarten readiness. Aaron, another TFA teacher, had a similar experience:

I have some parents that come in like, “Well, why are they playing? Why aren’t they sitting down writing or reading? Why is that little girl writing her name, but my kid can’t write? Why isn’t she able to spell her name? My kid should be able to count to 100 by now.”

TJ shared similar experiences during parent-teacher conferences:

One parent asked me when his child was going to learn the ABCs, colors, numbers. I feel like the parents are expecting a lot. I teach their kids. Parents feel children should know different things at a certain age even when the child is barely thinking.

Lourdes believed that this happened less often:

Parents who are very understanding of our focus on social and emotional development . . . have been at the center for a few years . . . I think they’ve kind of grown up with their kids and they’re saying social emotional first and academics after.

Alice also believed that parents’ support for a whole child development curriculum approach stemmed from “how open they are to understanding where we’re coming from and how what we’re trying to do is actually beneficial to their child.”

Though the teachers have convictions about educating the whole child, they felt

compelled to please the parents nonetheless. For example, sometimes Aaron responded to parents' requests by saying, "Okay, I'll work with your kid doing this." Lourdes goes on to say, "I think it would definitely be a little bit hard to not have any academics, as you would want to absolutely appease the parents." TJ believed this affected teachers, "It upsets the teacher because they're focused on meeting all different requirements." Alice explained how the parents' anxieties become the teachers' anxieties and, for this reason, "there is a need for parent education in terms of how educators educate children."

Lourdes, Aaron, and Cathy also shared this idea, for example, Lourdes emphasized the need for a parent workshop:

Showing them, with their kids, some of the examples of activities, and showing them they're learning X, Y, and Z by doing this. A walkthrough . . . could really be helpful to show parents that their children are still learning what they want them to, it just looks different.

Aaron believed that this step was extremely important:

I'm their teacher for one or two years, but their mom and their dad is gonna be their teacher for the rest of their life. So if I can help support and educate the parents, then their child is that much more likely to be successful in their future education . . . across all domains.

Cathy also viewed parent education as necessary in order to help relieve the pressure teachers feel about more academics:

They might lose sight of what is important and how children really learn and might begin to worry about how to get children ready for kindergarten instead of focusing on the

present. This can lead to developmentally inappropriate practices and/or expectations. Alice, a non-TFA teacher, spoke of another tool that teachers have within arm's reach, that of self-reflection:

I've been prepared for this job. I'd want to say that I've got the best education, and that I'm doing the best that I can and that I'm being supported also by the school and the staff that I work with to continue doing what I should be doing . . . I'm an expert.

Alice did not understand why parents valued so much the opinion of other professionals such as pediatricians and not her own, but in the end she must believe in herself and have the appropriate support to help her continue to grow as a preschool teacher.

During the focus group, many factors that the teachers believed contribute to the parents' demands for more academics were discussed, such as pressure, stress, inappropriate expectations, competition as well as parents' age, socioeconomic status, occupation, and marital status. Teachers also felt that the parents' demands changed based on the gender of the teacher, if teachers had children of their own, and whether or not parents viewed teachers as professionals. For example, Aaron shared how it took six to eight months to build relationships with some parents because of his gender, which Juan also experienced:

Yeah, like the grandparents that drop off are like, "Who is this young person with my child?" And just different vibes, where they would go straight to my co-teacher who's a woman and talk to her instead of me or just different dynamics in the classroom. But yeah, it took half a year [as well] to get those parents to open up.

These different factors shed light on the need for different types of support systems as discussed next.

Theme 7: Support Systems Are a Necessity

All of the teachers believed that there was room for progress and that with some additional support, they could better implement a whole child development curriculum approach. For example, Lourdes, a TFA teacher, shared:

I think it'd be really helpful to have someone who is almost like an expert in behavioral management, and someone you could go to and be like, "Hey, I have a student who's showing these behaviors. I just don't know what the best way to handle it would be."

Along these lines, Juan, a TFA teacher, believed that if the center really focused on the whole child, then it must focus on the whole family:

Like we don't have home visits. We don't have a file on what their home life has been like. There's a disconnect between our kids who go to therapy, our kids who go to services, if our kids have IEPs—all that stuff is not available.

Juan argued that this situation prevented him from seeing the full picture and, in the beginning, it was hard to have the more difficult conversations with parents because there was no relationship even though he knew this would help him better understand his students, "So I feel like we're starting from scratch."

Aaron, another TFA teacher, on the other hand, requested more training on a whole child development curriculum approach, "From what I understand, but I haven't been trained on it—it's child-driven, and flexible with child's interest." Thankfully, Aaron reported that he was able to pull from his ECE background to gain a deeper understanding, but Juan, another TFA teacher with training in elementary education, but not ECE, said he did not have the same choice, "None of us have really been trained on the curriculum." Aaron mentioned how during his interview,

he was told that the Center was Reggio Emilia inspired, but that was the first and last time he heard that term being used. For this reason, he said he would like a deeper understanding of this curriculum approach even though he has some knowledge of it based on his ECE background.

On the other hand, TJ and Cathy, non-TFA teachers, felt they had a better grasp of the curriculum, but wanted support regarding the finer details. For example, Cathy requested help with “how to create lesson plans that revolve around the concept of interest. How do I find a balance between what the children know and what I, as the teacher, want to bring to the table?” Lastly, Cathy wanted to know how to have better communication with parents about what their children were learning and how they were learning.

During the focus group, many of the teachers expressed how they were enjoying engaging in different dialogue around ECE topics and how this type of support was necessary, as expressed by Alice, “Centers can [help teachers] engage in dialogue . . . I know like in our center we’ve had workshops and everything, but actually sitting down and have teachers actually talk to each other and check in with each other.” Lourdes agreed:

Yeah, I think it would be good to have an open dialogue, because I think a lot of people bring in different backgrounds with education, different experience. And I think it would be helpful to have a space where [teachers can talk] . . . with each other to kind of figure out how to merge the two and figure out what maybe would be the best to see in classrooms.

In the end, it came down to communication not only among teachers, but also with parents and policymakers. Everyone wanted well-rounded successful students and ultimately “active participants” in society, as Alice described. Teachers, parents, and policymakers all need to be

on the same page because ultimately educators want to help the children and their families, as Aaron explained:

And . . . my goal in my education is having a child learn to—I mean you don't need to learn to love learning. You just know. Kids are inquisitive learners from the get-go, but somehow you lose that. And kids kind of lose that when information is being shoved down your throat and you just don't want to learn your timetables because you're too busy wanting to draw. So that's my whole kind of philosophy is just teaching kids to love learning and school.

Conclusion

Chapter 4 detailed the experiences and perceptions of six urban public preschool teachers in the greater Los Angeles area and the pressure to become more academic in their classrooms in lieu of a whole child development curriculum approach. By using a multistep inductive analysis, several themes emerged from the participants. The teachers believed that a whole child development curriculum approach should be at the heart of preschool curriculum, but they differed in its purpose as an end goal or as a process of learning. All of the teachers believed in developmentally appropriate practices, but the TFA teachers used a whole child development curriculum approach as a medium to teach more academics. It was evident that teacher training, education reforms, and parents' expectations impacted teachers' beliefs and practices. In the end, they requested more support in behavioral management, the actual implementation of a whole child development curriculum approach, and better parent communication. Chapter 5 provides a summary of the findings, answers to the research questions, analysis of the findings, implications, and recommendations for future studies.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

This chapter is organized into five parts: summary of the study, discussion of findings, implications, recommendations, and conclusion. In the summary of the study, I review the purpose of the study and the research questions that guide this study. The discussion of the findings includes answers to the research questions and explores the themes that emerged from the study. The implication section delineates how this case study informs the community of Eastnorth Children's Center preschool program and other public preschools in general. I include recommendations for future studies, and I conclude with a reflection of how this study impacted my work as a researcher, teacher, administrator, and leader in the Early Childhood Education (ECE) field.

Summary of the Study

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative case study focused on the experiences of six urban public preschool teachers in the greater Los Angeles area and the pressure they have faced from parents and other stakeholders to become more academic in their classrooms in lieu of a whole child development curriculum approach that focuses on the social, emotional, physical, linguistic, and cognitive development of children. Preschool has become the new panacea to eliminate the achievement gap seen in the public kindergarten–12 education system nationwide, and for this reason the demands for more academics at a younger age have grown. In *Standardized Childhoods*, Fuller (2007) discussed the political agenda to make preschool more like kindergarten, kindergarten

more like first grade, and so forth, even if it leads to developmentally inappropriate practices. For this reason, it was important to gain a deeper understanding of how preschool teachers have made sense with what they know about child development and what is expected of them, as well as how this shift affected their teaching and pedagogy. Lastly, it was important to hear from the teachers about what support systems were needed in order to achieve what was in the best interest of the children.

Research Questions

This study focused on the experiences of current urban public preschool teachers who worked in a classroom environment that supported the development of the whole child. In order to understand the pressure they faced from parents and other stakeholders to become more academic, the following questions were the focus of this study:

1. How do preschool teachers articulate the pressure they face from parents and other stakeholders to teach more academics when implementing a whole child development curriculum in an urban public preschool?
2. How do preschool teachers articulate the impact of this pressure on their actual practice and pedagogy in an urban public preschool?
3. What are the support systems that preschool teachers deem fundamental to implement a whole child development curriculum in light of pressure at an urban public preschool?

Findings

In a six-month period, as the researcher, I conducted observations and interviews with six preschool teachers of Eastnorth Children's Center preschool program, an organization that had

been providing social services and educational programs to the Los Angeles community for the last 25 years. In addition, I conducted follow-up interviews with three of the six preschool teachers who belonged to Teach for America (TFA), an American nonprofit organization whose mission is to eliminate educational inequity by enlisting high-achieving recent college graduates and professionals to teach for at least two years in low-income communities throughout the United States (www.teachforamerica.org), as well as a focus group with four of the six preschool teachers. Furthermore, I analyzed documents in the classrooms that supported the implementation of a whole child development curriculum approach. By using a multistep inductive analysis, I was able to find themes as they emerged from the participants. Their experiences, beliefs, and values provided insights into the shift that appeared to be taking over the ECE field to become more academic and how teachers were embracing or resisting this change. The seven key findings in this study were framed by the themes and domains and verified by the various data collected over a six-month period. They were:

1. Theory not practice
2. All about the end goal
3. Case-by-case implementation
4. Teacher training matters
5. Education reforms and national public policies matter
6. Preschool parents' goals for their children
7. Support systems are a necessity

Discussion of Findings

As the demand for preschool to become more academic grows nationwide, it is important to hear the voices of teachers that work in a preschool classroom environment. The participants' detailed how a whole child development curriculum approach needs to be at the heart of the preschool curriculum. However, some teachers focused on children's social and emotional development as a medium in order to implement more academic instruction, while other teachers viewed it as a lifelong learning process. For this reason, a whole child development curriculum was implemented on a case-by-case basis. Another reason was that some teachers lacked expertise on how to implement a whole child development curriculum to the entire classroom rather than individually. The preschool teachers with an ECE background appeared to have a better understanding and command of a whole child development curriculum approach in comparison to the preschool teachers with an Elementary Education background. The teachers without a TFA background also expressed less interest in academics in comparison to the teachers with a TFA background. However, all of the teachers expressed how education reforms were changing the dynamics of the ECE field as well as preschool parents' goals for their children. In the end, the teachers asked for three types of support systems that focused on: children's behavioral management, a whole child development curriculum approach (theory to practice), and better communication with parents as well as with their colleagues. The following is a discussion of the findings in relation to the three research questions.

Question 1: How do preschool teachers articulate the pressure they face from parents and other stakeholders to teach more academics when implementing a whole child development curriculum in an urban public preschool?

All of the teachers at Eastnorth Children's Center preschool program described the curriculum as child-centered, emergent, and based on the development of the whole child. The program emphasized the development of social and emotional skills, and there was no mention of teaching a more academic curriculum. The only form of assessment used—as described by the teachers—was the Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP), a teacher observation tool for children's learning along a continuum developed by the California Department of Education for young children. This same tool was used to help develop the curriculum in the classrooms as well as the children's individual developmental journals as seen in the classroom observations. A teacher even mentioned how, when he was interviewed by the director, she went as far as to say that their preschool program was Reggio Emilia inspired, a well-known whole child development curriculum established in Italy after World War II that is based on Lev Vygotsky's socio-cultural theoretical framework (1978) and other early childhood psychologists and philosophers such as Dewey, Piaget, Gardner, and Bruner. This program was totally focused on the social and emotional development of the child and it was noticeable through its schedule of the day, its curriculum, and the set-up of the environment, yet it was not immune to parents' expectations of more academics in the classroom, hence the theme that emerged both in interviews and the focus group was the implementation of a whole child development curriculum approach in theory, but not in practice.

All of the teachers expressed experiencing mixed expectations from parents to teach more academics in their classrooms. For example, some parents from the very beginning of the school year wanted to know concretely what type of academic content the teachers were going to teach the children in order to get them ready for kindergarten. Other parents were not as direct in the beginning and waited for the school year to progress and to build relationships with the teachers before asking them for more academics. According to the teachers, this group of parents was either new to the center and was not too familiar with the philosophy of the preschool program or had older children going through the kindergarten–12 public education system and knew firsthand how rigorous each grade level had become. This type of expectation created pressure among the teachers, which they handled in different ways. The themes that emerged from both individual interviews and the focus group were: all about the end goal, education reforms and national policies matter, and preschool parents' goals for their children.

It appeared that the teachers with an elementary education background who also happened to be part of TFA tried to appease the parents by “sprinkling” academic content whenever possible. One of these teachers also tried her best to communicate with her parents as much as possible about what she was doing with the children, what they were learning, and how the curriculum approach looked different in preschool than it did in grade school. This same teacher felt that it was beneficial to educate the parents through workshops to answer their questions about a whole child development curriculum approach. The non-TFA teachers with an ECE background articulated how parental expectations' for more academics made them upset. They wanted to make sure that parents knew that their children were learning and that, as teachers, they knew what they were doing. One particular teacher even commented on how it

was hard for her to know that parents did not view her as a professional or expert in the field, yet they did not hesitate to take advice when their pediatricians made recommendations. This realization, however, only made her reflect on her practices to become a better teacher and to always keep the children's best interests at heart. The theme that emerged from the interviews and focus group was that teacher training matters.

All teachers expressed support from the preschool program to implement a whole child development curriculum approach; however, based on their TFA training, TFA teachers were inclined to push for more academic content and assessments, although this was in complete contradiction to the practices at Eastnorth Children's Center preschool program. The TFA teachers tried to make sense of these different expectations by focusing on children's social and emotional development initially and then more on academic content through developmentally appropriate practices. The theme that emerged from the interviews and focus group was the case-by-case implementation of a whole child development curriculum approach.

It is important to note, however, that not all parents expected more academics in the classroom. Some parents did not question a whole child development curriculum approach or were simply happy to see their children maturing socially and emotionally. In these cases, the teachers felt appreciated and competent in what they were doing in the classroom.

The development of the whole child as supported by Rudolf Steiner's Waldorf approach, Maria Montessori's approach, and Loris Malaguzzi's Reggio Emilia approach, which were influenced by the work of Vygotsky, is being challenged by policies such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Race to the Top (RTT), which have impacted parents' beliefs. Even though times have changed, the current goals for young children are developmentally inappropriate. If

Steiner, Montessori, Malaguzzi, and Vygotsky operated in today's landscape, they would likely support the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), which advocates for the development of the whole child, and they would probably encourage more research on the benefits of play and hands-on exploration. Furthermore, they would find a way to better inform parents to bring them back to a point where they can appreciate the present and stress less about the past or future.

Question 2: How do preschool teachers articulate the impact of this pressure on their actual practice and pedagogy in an urban, public preschool?

The teachers' responsibilities to implement a whole child development curriculum approach included observations of the children in order to create classroom activities based on the children's interests. These activities ranged based on the concept of exploration, which could last a few weeks to a few months. Developmentally appropriate activities were created through hands-on exploration and play, as seen during the classroom observations. However, TFA teachers admitted to including more explicit academic content in such activities. For example, when a teacher introduced the concept of the scientific method to help the children resolve conflicts, they learned about the meaning of the word hypothesis as well as that the word hypothesis began with the letter "h." In this sense, these teachers felt they were still focusing on the whole child and doing academics to meet everyone's demands. The theme that emerged from the observations, analyses of documents, interviews, and focus group was that the implementation of a whole child development curriculum approach happened in theory, not practice.

The TFA teachers realized, however, that they were not going to be able to walk into the classroom and implement the TFA mission—to eliminate the so-called achievement gap—by imparting academic content. They began to understand that children’s social and emotional development was important and, for this reason, they decided to start from there because they believed that without a strong social and emotional foundation, children cannot learn. They saw a whole child development curriculum approach as a medium to provide academic instruction instead of a lifelong learning process. This view differed with that of non-TFA teachers with an ECE background. They did not believe that a whole child development curriculum approach should be substituted with more academics; instead, they believed that a whole child development curriculum approach must be ongoing and that all aspects of a child’s development must be addressed. This was evident in the themes that emerged from the interviews and focus group about the end goal, teacher training matters, education reforms, and national public policy matters.

Unfortunately, the TFA teachers implemented a whole child development curriculum approach case by case or as needed because they viewed academics as separate from a whole child development curriculum approach. They also discussed the difficulty of applying a whole child development curriculum approach to a classroom with more than 15 children. This sentiment was expressed by some of the non-TFA teachers as well.

The non-TFA teachers focused on the social and emotional development of the children and did not make it a priority to incorporate academics into a whole child development curriculum approach. Instead, they expressed feeling upset about the notion of more academics in their classrooms as they tried to remain true to their ECE training about the importance of

developing the whole child and not only the cognitive needs of the child. In this case, the non-TFA teachers understood that the parents may not be pleased by the lack of academic curriculum, but at least they were implementing theory into practice while staying aligned with the preschool program's philosophy and their own personal philosophy. The theme of teacher training matters was evident in the classroom observations, interviews, and focus group.

European childhood education thinkers Steiner, Montessori, and Malaguzzi, who championed the development of the whole child, would likely continue to agree that teachers are an integral component of the curriculum and that it is important that teachers have a clear understanding of their role and how they can best support their students in their classrooms. They would also likely agree that teachers wear multiple hats, one of them being an advocate for what is best for children. Sometimes doing the right thing is harder, but it is necessary even when it appears that the individual stands alone.

Question 3: What are the support systems that preschool teachers deem fundamental to implement a whole child development curriculum in light of pressure at an urban public preschool?

All of the preschool teachers were very appreciative of having the opportunity to work with coteachers in their classrooms. Moreover, five out of the six teachers were enrolled in graduate programs at the time of the study, and they felt this allowed them to interact with other graduate students and educators who might have had comparable experiences in their school settings. The teachers also talked about being grateful for having professors and relevant reading materials as a form of support. The TFA teachers felt that, for the most part, the TFA organization also served as a support system. Even with all of this apparent support, the teachers

felt that there was room for more. Once again, the theme of teacher training matters surfaced during classroom observations and interviews.

All of the teachers reported a need for more behavioral management strategies for the children. However, this appeared to be a priority for the TFA teachers, where it was not for the non-TFA teachers regardless of their age, education, or teaching experience. The TFA teachers talked about the importance of building individual relationships with the children as well as having further access into each child's home life—hence the notion of a case-by-case whole child development curriculum approach.

Another area that the preschool teachers said they required more support in was training on a whole child development curriculum approach. This was especially true for those teachers without an ECE background and that were part of TFA, whereas the non-TFA teachers were more concern about the finer details of a whole child development curriculum approach, such as what type of activities to develop based on the children's interest. For example, the TFA teachers viewed academics as separate from a whole child development curriculum approach, even though they are not mutually exclusive because all developmental domains are important determinants of schooling and socioeconomic success, however much of public policy discussion focuses on children's cognitive and academic development (Zigler et al., 2011). The themes of “all about the end goal” and “education reforms and national policies matter” emerged during classroom observations and interviews as well. Another theme that emerged from the analyses of documents was “support systems as a necessity.” The schedule of the day, the weekly curriculum lesson plan, and children's binders were all created based on the DRDP, which

focuses on the whole child, but this is not the only way to create and implement a whole child development curriculum approach.

The non-TFA teachers also requested more training on how to better communicate with parents about the importance of a whole child development curriculum approach and how learning looks different in preschool. Communication with parents is important because in order to support a high quality preschool experience, parent participation is monumental, as seen in the Reggio Emilia approach, because it is considered both a right and responsibility (Edwards et al., 1998). Parents, teachers, and policy makers must focus on the development of the whole child. All of these ideas fell under the theme of support systems are a necessity.

Once again Steiner, Montessori, and Malaguzzi, would advocate for different types of support systems not only for the teachers, but also for the children and their families. In all of their different, yet similar, approaches to the development of the whole child, the sense of community played a critical role that must not be overlooked. Dialogue would be considered of utmost importance. Humans learn from each other and from their environment, as described by Vygotsky, and it only makes sense to take the same approach for education.

Summary of Discussion

The voices of teachers who worked in an urban public preschool in the greater Los Angeles area confirmed that pressure comes from parents and other stakeholders to teach more academics in their classrooms even when the preschool program did not support a more academic curriculum because it believed in the importance of developing the whole child and did not push for a more academic curriculum. It was evident that teachers' training had an impact on teachers' beliefs and the teachers' implementation of a whole child development curriculum

approach. Also, it was evident that education reforms had shaped parents' expectations and demands for a more academic curriculum at the expense of the development of social and emotional skills in young children. In this case study, the TFA teachers tried to balance the development of the whole child and more academics in an attempt to appease the parents, while the non-TFA teachers created a disparity between their lack of implementation of more academics and what parents wanted.

Implications of this Study

Implications for Eastnorth Children's Center Preschool Program

As the researcher, I did not have access to information about when Eastnorth Children's Center preschool program first partnered with TFA, but it is likely that the partnership occurred after 2006 when TFA launched its ECE initiative. Three out of the six teachers who participated in this study were members of TFA. They were all placed at this particular site through different hiring events that TFA coordinated. This partnership with TFA had implications for Eastnorth Children's Center preschool program because TFA's goals are not aligned with the goals of the preschool program. Furthermore, two out of the three TFA teachers did not have an ECE background but instead had a background in elementary education. This disparity between teachers' educational backgrounds demonstrated the need for more training on-site in order to create a cohesive goal as a program. This was absolutely necessary if Eastnorth Children's Center preschool program was serious about a whole child development curriculum approach and wanted to create consistency on how it was implemented throughout the classrooms among its teachers. Lastly, TFA teachers were only required to stay at the site for two years, which led

to the important point of retention in a field where high teacher turnover is the norm, yet teachers are the number one indicator of a high quality preschool experience (Bowman et al., 2001).

As the researcher, I did not anticipate coming across TFA teachers and, secondly, I did not expect to find such disparity between them and non-TFA teachers, especially because all of the preschool teachers worked for the same preschool program. These findings were connected to the research questions because the TFA teachers appeared to turn the pressure of more academics into a personal challenge, which influenced their practice and pedagogy. TFA teachers found ways to become more academic in their classrooms instead of taking the opposite approach and challenging TFA's practices. As TFA continues to grow, more and more of these teachers will continue to become part of the ECE field on a temporary or long-term basis. As a result, they will have the ability to make an impact of a lifetime for better or for worse. The implication for the ECE field is that with more supporters for academics in the field, it will remain difficult to implement a whole child development curriculum approach. Furthermore, TFA teachers usually serve in low-income communities, where children do not need to be stressed about academics, but instead need to learn how to socialize with those around them and play. More academic-based preschool teaching will create a great disservice to communities that can benefit from high-quality preschools. TFA has become the epitome of NCLB, RTT, and more recently the Common Core State Standards Initiative and if not challenged to embrace whole child curriculum principles, the ECE field as we know it may sooner or later become a relic of the past.

Implications for Preschool Teachers

The pressure for more academics is real and is likely to remain an issue into the foreseeable future. For this reason, preschool teachers must be well informed about child development and gain a better understanding of what a whole child development curriculum approach entails. This also means that preschool teachers must be able to articulate to parents what learning looks like in preschool and why developmentally appropriate practices are key to the development of the whole child. Preschool teachers must be able to convey research findings, the goals of organizations such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), appropriate assessment tools such as the Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP), and the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS). In addition, teachers should know and understand the history of ECE, including knowledge of European childhood education thinkers such as Rudolf Steiner, Maria Montessori, Loris Malaguzzi, and Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978). For this to happen, preschool teachers need better training in the field of ECE and more experience to guide them on how to implement a whole child development curriculum approach successfully while being able to articulate how children learn through developmentally appropriate practices (Bodrova et al., 1999).

The best way to introduce ECE teachers to a more child-centered approach would be to offer them various opportunities to visit programs where this type of curriculum is implemented. Then, these experiences can be enhanced with readings about the Waldorf, Montessori, and Reggio Emilia approaches. In recent years, there has been a growth in reading materials related to a whole child and/or child-centered curriculum approach. The last step is to allow the teachers

to try it in their own classrooms and be able to reflect on it and try it again. Practice will not make perfection, but it will increase experience, confidence, and support.

Preschool teachers are children's best advocates because they have the knowledge and power to engage in meaningful conversations with parents. They must take their roles as educators seriously and remember that they are experts in the field. It is important that preschool teachers also create a positive impact outside the classroom by becoming more involved in public policy. This is necessary if the field of ECE is to survive the test of time by garnering ongoing support for the development of the whole child over more academics.

Implications for Children

The importance of teachers to create high-quality ECE programs cannot be overemphasized. Even though legislation and expectations affect what occurs in the classroom, they do not ensure children's learning. The most powerful influence on whether and what children learn is teacher's interactions with them, in real-life decisions that the teacher makes throughout the day. It is the teacher's classroom plans and organization, sensitivity and responsiveness to all children, and moment-to-moment interactions with them that have the greatest impact on children's development and learning. The way teachers design learning experiences, how they engage children and respond to them, how they adapt their teaching and interactions to children's backgrounds, and the feedback they give that matter greatly in children's learning.

It is up to preschool programs' administration and staff to advocate for the development of the whole child and resist the push for more academics in the classrooms. If this is not the

case, young children will no longer participate in high quality preschool experiences. As Miller and Almon (2009) have argued:

Academic programs that emphasize more direct instruction [which] have unintended social and emotional consequences, creating students who are less likely to get along with their peers and feel comfortable in school, and more likely to show evidence of stress-induced hyperactivity, to be hostile, and to engage in antisocial acts. (p. 52)

Children's intrinsic motivation must be fostered. Children's voices must be heard. Children must be given the opportunity to think, make choices, and to reach their fullest potential.

Recommendations for Future Research

Parents' Perspectives

There are some studies of preschool and kindergarten teachers sharing how parents are demanding more academics, but it is necessary to have a firsthand account of parents' beliefs and where these beliefs come from. Just like this study with urban, public preschool teachers' experiences makes an important contribution to the discourse, a study focused on parents will be significant in order to attain a full picture. If teachers have a better understanding of where parents are coming from and understand their current knowledge on child development then both parties might be able to have more honest conversations. They might even come to an agreement and advocate for similar goals instead of being at opposite ends. Parents and teachers must be able to work together in order to truly create a positive and high quality preschool experience for children (Powell, 2000). Parents have a voice as well and they have the power to create change. For this reason, parents must be well informed. In the end this will help the parents, the teachers, and the children.

Education Reforms' Impact on ECE

Many of the education reforms mentioned throughout this study referred to the kindergarten-12 public education system with an ECE component. These education reforms thus far appear to have an indirect impact on the field of ECE, but a comprehensive analysis would be beneficial to determine whether or not academics and accountability at such a young age is what is best for the future of ECE. Teachers, parents, and other stakeholders must be aware that there is much to lose if the wrong decision is made:

Those who espouse the whole child approach view all systems of development (including cognitive development) as synergistic and, in that regard, as the proper focus of child rearing and education. In contrast, those who believe that the cognitive system merits the most attention are essentially rejecting the needs of the rest of the child. By ignoring the contributions of the physical and socioemotional system to learning, they promote an educational system designed to fail. (Zigler et al., 2011)

For example, the Alliance for Childhood (2009), a nonprofit partnership of educators, health professionals, and other advocates for children who are concerned about the decline in children's health and well-being and who share a sense that childhood itself is endangered (www.allianceforchildhood.org), published *Crisis In the Kindergarten: Why Children Need Play in School*, concluded that "current early childhood practices are almost certainly doing harm to many children...[because they do not address] the full range of a child's needs-physical, social, emotional, and cognitive" (Miller & Almon, 2009, p. 50). If this is the verdict in kindergarten, then what is the verdict in preschool?

At this moment, the future of the ECE field is uncertain. In an ideal world, the ECE field would take care of its internal problems and serve as a model of the importance of educating the whole child not only when they are young, but also throughout life. However, the reality is that the ECE field not only suffers from internal problems, but also faces external pressure to become more academic. This pressure is overwhelming and affects everyone. This pressure is also powerful, and kindergarten and other primary grades have succumbed to it. It is only a matter of time before ECE shares the same fate if nothing gets done. If ECE becomes like the rest of the kindergarten–12 system, it will become very difficult to move away from the era of testing and accountability. Furthermore, the nation will have failed the youngest members of the community.

TFA's ECE Initiative

TFA's ECE Initiative (2006) is fewer than 10 years old, but research on its impact on the ECE field—both positive and negative—is necessary in order to assess whether ECE TFA teachers are receiving accurate information and proper support, especially when many of these teachers are placed in low-income communities. It is important to know whether these children really need the earlier exposure to academics or if they are being pushed to fail. Maybe in the end, all they need (like every other child) is a safe, consistent, predictable, loving environment.

TFA proceeds to grow across the nation, which means it is fair to assume that many of its teachers will continue to serve in different ECE preschool programs. If this is the case, then it is absolutely necessary that these teachers receive ECE training from ECE experts in the field for more than a five-week period. These teachers need to understand that developmentally appropriate practices such as play is directly linked to children's ability to master academic

content such as literacy and numeracy (Miller & Almon, 2009), which is their ultimate goal as an organization. Like many other educational reforms and initiatives, TFA has good intentions, but its approach might be backward. It is time to move forward.

Reflections on the Research Study

This was my first time conducting such an intricate study, but now that I have come full circle, I dare say that I look forward to the next one. I made many mistakes along the way, but I can honestly say that I learned from every single one of them. Just as it takes a village to raise a child, it also takes a village to make studies like this one possible. As a teacher, I was reminded of the amazing opportunity I have every day to work with children and have an impact that can last for the rest of their lives. I was also reminded of all of the hard work and dedication required to be the best possible teacher, especially when new to the field. As an administrator, I was reminded that teachers could always use more support. Just like we encourage teachers to scaffold children, administrators must be able to scaffold their staff. Administrators must remember that, for the most part, teachers are doing their best, they are wearing multiple hats, and they are experiencing multiple expectations; yet they come to work every day with the excitement to know what they will learn from the children and what they might inspire in children. As part of the greater field of ECE, I understand that the road ahead will not be easy, but this is why I personally have prepared myself to help others by continuing to advocate for the development of the whole child because I personally believe, like many of the pioneers in ECE, that children are strong, competent, and are not, by any means, empty vases to fill. If society wants critical thinking, articulate, empathetic, healthy, and humane citizens, then all of these qualities must be continuously fostered in them from the very beginning.

Conclusion

Public urban preschool teachers are currently facing pressure similar to what public, urban kindergarten teachers faced to become more academic in an attempt to rescue the kindergarten–12 public education system. This pressure starts at the national level, which trickles down to parents, teachers, and children. Many times, education reforms are created without regard for research, which is a huge mistake. For many decades, child development research has driven ECE teacher training, but now training is being tailored to fit the demands of the education reform movement as seen through TFA. There is a huge misconception in the community about what children should know and when they should know it, which creates the illusion of urgency. The belief that the sooner children can read, write, and recite their letters, numbers, shapes, and colors, the better off they will be is also an illusion. Children are being rushed in their development in order to reach the next milestone and are being deprived of developmentally appropriate activities for a brighter future when their present is bleak. It is time for everyone to become more knowledgeable about child development and appreciate each step of the way in order to stop the many injustices that the youngest members of our society endure daily.

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