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The Significance of National Association for the Education of Young Children Accreditation in Elevating Quality of Early Childhood Education: Administrators', Teachers', and Parents' Beliefs about Accreditation and its Process

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ABSTRACT

The Significance of National Association for the Education of Young Children Accreditation in Elevating Quality of Early Childhood Education: Administrators', Teachers', and Parents' Beliefs about Accreditation and its Process

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The following is a doctoral dissertation that studied administrators', teachers', and parents' perceptions and attitudes related to an early childhood center/preschool accreditation experience. A qualitative case study of one preschool center focused on the influence that the decision to pursue accreditation and implement the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) self-study process had on administrators, teachers, and parents. Interviews with administrators, teachers, and parents explored (a) issues that motivated the pursuit of NAEYC accreditation; (b) the NAEYC guidelines and their experience of the self-study and quality-improvement process; and (c) their perception of outcomes following accreditation. Current NAEYC guidelines are based on key child development theories and research, and require programs to integrate Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP) in school curricula and staff training. It was necessary to explore how these NAEYC recommendations regarding DAP were interpreted during the quality-improvement and accreditation process. Key themes

and issues around the accreditation experience were revealed through analyses of qualitative data. This case study of NAEYC accreditation illuminated factors in the decision to pursue accreditation and implement quality improvements leading to NAEYC accreditation. This case may serve as a model of a successful accreditation process to encourage early childhood centers to undertake quality improvements and pursue national NAEYC accreditation.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The first 5 years of a child's life are critical for healthy social, cognitive, and emotional development. Research suggests that providing children with high-quality preschool programs during the early childhood stage reduces academic problems that emerge later in school (Barnett, 1988; Bloom & Bella, 2005; Magnuson, Ruhm, & Waldfogel, 2007).

Every year, thousands of children with delays in language and academic skills enter public kindergartens (Ramey & Ramey, 2004). Achievement gaps persist for all children, but particularly for children of minority families (Cadelle, Hemphill, Vanneman, & Rahman, 2011). Children who enter school lagging behind their peers tend to remain delayed in later grades and high school (Kainz & Vernon-Feagans, 2007). Abundant research evidence has demonstrated that quality preschool experiences improve children's later school performance (Abadiano & Turner, 2005; Barnett, Yarosz, Thomas, Jung, & Blanco, 2007; Bartik, 2006; Gormley, 2007; Karoly, 2009; Schweinhart, Barnes, & Weikart, 1993; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

In the United States, 60% of children under the age of six are cared for outside of the family home (Mulligan, Brimhall, West, & Chapman, 2005; Schumacher, Hamm, Goldstein, & Lombardi, 2006). Unfortunately, the average early childhood education[1] program in the United States is of poor-to-mediocre quality (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2007; Rimm-Kaufman & Ponitz, 2009; Winter & Kelley, 2008).

[1] The term *Early Childhood Education* is used in this document to refer to all early childhood educational programs offered for children older than those enrolled in infant/toddler day care but not yet in kindergarten. Early childhood education includes nursery school, preschool, and pre-kindergarten (pre-K) programs and is used interchangeably with the term *preschool* in this work.

There have been many efforts to increase access to—and the quality of—preschool programs for all children; yet relatively few preschools meet national quality standards, as indexed by accreditation. Given the benefits of documenting preschool quality via accreditation, what influences a preschool community to seek (or, typically, not to seek) accreditation remains unclear. It is important to explore how quality improvements and the accreditation process are perceived, shaped, and undertaken by preschool directors, teachers, and parents.

School Readiness, the Achievement Gap, and the Discourse of Accountability

School readiness and achievement are at the forefront of policy concerns in American education. Across the United States, a gap in academic achievement persists between African American and Hispanic public school students compared to White non-Hispanic students. Results of the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress in mathematics and reading showed that despite small overall gains in scores from 1990 to 2009, the gap persists: African American and Latino students' reading and math scores were 24 to 28 points lower than White students in fourth and eighth grade (Cadelle et al., 2011).

A dominant view is that quality early education can aid in closing the achievement gap by providing "school readiness"; that is, preparing children academically, socially, and emotionally before their entry to kindergarten (Abadiano & Turner, 2005). The publication of the report *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (Gardner et al., 1983) during the Reagan presidency intensified this view. The report argued that the American educational system was failing to meet the national need for a competitive workforce. It

contended that nearly 40% of 17-year-old students could not successfully draw inferences from written materials, and only one in five students could write a persuasive essay.

Since the publication of *A Nation at Risk,* two key changes were initiated: (a) higher standards for students, and (b) more rigorous certifications for K–12 teachers (Henniger, 2004). This effort led to an emphasis on improving schools and measuring academic outcomes, which became the central focus of the federal 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). As a result, standards have increased for kindergarten teachers and their curricula. Preschools have come under pressure to get children ready for a more rigorous kindergarten experience. With NCLB, preschool curricula began to look like previous kindergarten programs, with less developmental emphasis and much more of an academic focus. Today, many kindergartens have adopted material from the historical first-grade curricula, and in turn preschools often function as kindergartens once did.

Some early childhood advocates and researchers have warned the public about the risks of introducing teacher-directed academics into preschool programs. In her book *What Happened to Recess and Why Are Our Children Struggling in Kindergarten?* Susan Ohanian (2002) showed that kindergarten curricula have dramatically shifted through the years, from a maturational emphasis to a more academic focus. Other experts have warned that didactic, teacher-controlled instruction undermines young children's intrinsic interest in learning (Katz, 1987), undermines their self-perceptions of competence (Kamii, 1985), weakens the young child's willingness to take academic risks (Elkind, 1987), and may foster dependence on adult authority for defining tasks and evaluating outcomes (Elkind, 1986). In response, more "child-centered" approaches emerged in Europe, such as the Reggio Emilia and Maria Montessori early

education programs (Cadwell, 1997; Montessori, 1967, 1994) that later becamepopular in the United States. As of 2013, thousands of public and private nursery and preschool centers are utilizing a wide variety of approaches and curricula, making quality difficult to measure.

The Difficult and Slow Path toward Universal Access

A federally funded universal preschool program would ensure that quality preschool education is available to every child in America, which in turn would promote school readiness by providing all children the early education necessary to begin school ready to learn. Studies of high-quality early childhood programs (Barnett, Hustedt, Robin, & Schulman, 2005; Frede & Barnett, 1992; Waldfogel, 2006) have demonstrated that they are beneficial to all students, and may create more opportunities for historically disadvantaged children.

The path toward universal access has been a slow one. In 1995, Georgia was the first state to offer preschool for all 4-year-old children. Today, 70% of Georgia's 4-year-olds are enrolled in public and private early education, including Head Start (National Institute for Early Education Research, 2008). Oklahoma was the next state to initiate universal preschool, and the state now enrolls 60% of its 4-year-old children. New York established its pre-kindergarten (pre-K) program in 1997, but limited funding restricts access primarily to children from low-income families. New Jersey and Kentucky target free preschool education for children living in poverty. New Jersey law mandates free high-quality preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds living in the state's highest poverty districts, and Kentucky provides free preschool to 4-year-olds from the state's lowest income families, and to 3- and 4-year-olds with disabilities. West Virginia will make pre- K available to all 4-year-olds by 2012. Universal preschool is available on a first-come, first-served basis to 4-year-olds in Washington, DC; and Los Angeles County is using

tobacco taxes to develop a universal preschool program for the city's 4-year-old children (Barnett, Epstein, Friedman, Boyd, & Hustedt, 2008).

Overall, state-by-state efforts remain mixed, and universal access to high-quality preschool programs is not a reality for most children across the United States. Therefore, private preschools must improve the quality of their programs through enhanced teacher training, adherence to developmentally appropriate curricula, and other commitmenrs, so that these early childhood programs can achieve national accreditation.

Preschool Quality Standards and Accreditation

The US Department of Education does not accredit preschools but recognizes nongovernmental professional organizations as authorities on the quality of early childhood education programs. These organizations develop evaluation criteria with the help of experts in the field, conduct peer review evaluations of the quality of the programs, and accredit them if they meet the criteria.

In 1929, due to concerns about the quality of proliferating nursery and preschool programs, Patty Smith Hill organized the National Association for Nursery Education (NANE), which published *Minimum Essentials for Nursery Education* (NANE, 1929). NANE reorganized in 1964 as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). NAEYC is a national nonprofit organization that sets research-based standards for early education, provides resources to improve early childhood program quality, promotes enhanced professional development for early childhood education staff, and educates the public on the need for high-quality early childhood programs. Since 1985, NAEYC has been the primary national voluntary accreditation system and is widely recognized as representing high-quality early childhood

education. NAEYC accreditation is a much sought-after recognition because it distinguishes the programs that have met national quality standards, which helps these preschools attract families and students. In some states, NAEYC accreditation helps confer eligibility for state tuition subsidies and other resources.

Aside from NAEYC, seven other organizations provide voluntary accreditation for early childhood programs:

- National Early Childhood Program Accreditation (NECPA)
- Accredited Professional Preschool Learning Environment (APPLE)
- American Montessori Society (AMS)
- Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI)
- Council on Accreditation (COA)
- National Accreditation Commission for Early Care and Education Programs (NAC)
- National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC)

However, not all of these organizations are available to work with preschool programs seeking accreditation. For example, the National Accreditation Commission for Early Care and Education Programs (NAC) provides standards only for childcare and not preschool. Table 1 offers a summary of the eight different accreditation systems available nationwide and their varying standards, criteria, and fees[2].

[2] Chapter 2 offers a brief description of the different organizations and their accreditation processes.

Table 1
Accreditation Institutions of Early Childhood Centers

Organization	Year accreditation started	No. of accredited programs nationwide	No. of standards/ content areas	No. of criteria/ indicators	Fees required[b]	Accreditation Term (Years)
ACSI	2011	147	10	80	$350	5
AMS	1995	165	9	97	$800	7
APPLE	1997	800+	4	98	$1,000 to $1,950	3 initially, then 5
COA	1978	191	12	411	$3,575 minimum	4
NAC	1995	700	6	91+	$1,350 to $2,234	3
NAEYC	1985	6,633	10	417	$1,275 to 2,350	5
NAFCC	1998	1,716	5[a]	289	$1,350 to $2,234	3
NECPA	1991	654	13	35	2,700 to $3,700	3

[a]NAFCC refers to standards as content areas. [b]Fees in all eight organizations vary by enrollment capacity for each school.

Title 22 and Title 5 Regulations

California requires most childcare centers and family childcare homes to be licensed by the California Department of Social Services under Title 22 of the California Code of Regulations. In California, the Childcare Center Licensing Requirements (California Department of Social Services, 2007b) define the early care and preschool standards, including minimum staff ratios of one teacher per four infants, and one teacher per 12 children from 36 months to enrollment in kindergarten. The training requirements for early childhood education teachers are often set by individual states and often do not require high school or college degrees. For example, in West Virginia, preschool teachers must attain state certification in early childhood education within 5 years of employment.

In California, public school systems require early childhood education staff to obtain Child Development Associate credentials from the Council for Professional Recognition, and directors earn a Child Care Professional designation from the National Child Care Association. These credentials involve only community-based vocational training in children's growth and development and 12 months of childcare experience, but do not require a college degree.

State preschool programs must meet additional requirements as a condition for receiving state funding. Preschools that receive Title 5 funds are licensed by Title 22 regulations and regulated by Title 5. These preschools face special challenges, as Title 5 regulations conflict with Title 22 regulations; or example, Title 22 regulations define infants as children from birth through age two, whereas Title 5 defines infants as children from birth through 18 months of age.

Furthermore, conflicting regulations govern teacher-to-student ratios: Title 22 requires programs serving preschool children to have one teacher for every 15 children, and one staff member for every 12 children. Title 5 child development programs serving preschool-age children are required to have one teacher for every 24 children and one staff member for every eight children. Teacher-to-student ratios are the highest in NAEYC-accredited centers, where there is one teacher for every nine students. Furthermore, staff qualifications differ between Title 22 and Title 5. Title 5 regulations require most staff to meet credential standards set by the Commission on Teacher Credentialing, and Title 5 requires its teachers to meet the same requirements as a lead teacher under Title 22. However, NAEYC accreditation requires all teachers to have an Associate of Arts (AA) degree in child development or a related field (Bolen, 2008).

As early childhood education teacher training and curricula are not standardized or enforced (from state to state and public to private), and as Title 22 regulations often conflict with Title 5, quality and content vary widely across thousands of public and private early childhood education centers and preschools. Accreditation serves as an important measure of the quality of early childhood programs and preschools, and accreditation agencies often set much higher quality and training standards than the minimum state licensing requirements for early childhood care and education.

Defining High-Quality Preschools

Some childcare centers are able to circumvent national accreditation by demonstrating that they have met high-quality standards. One widely used tool to implement quality improvements and measure the quality of preschools is the Early Childhood Environment

Rating Scale–Revised (ECERS–R) along with the Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale–R (ITERS–R). A brief review of the ECERS–R and ITERS–R systems and NAEYC accreditation criteria shows some of the key characteristics important for raising the quality of young children's preschool experiences.

The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale

The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale–Revised (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 1998) is the tool most commonly used to measure preschool quality, both in the United States and abroad. ECERS–R scores can be used to meet NAEYC accreditation criteria and document program quality. The ECERS–R scale lists 43 items organized into seven domain areas for children under the age of five, as follows:

- Personal care routines
- Space and furnishings
- Language and reasoning skills
- Social interactions
- Learning activities
- Program structure
- Parents and staff

Each dimension of ECERS–R has six or more detailed descriptors, where each item is rated on a scale from 1 (*Inadequate*) to 7 (*Excellent*) (Espinosa, 2002). This way an early childhood program is scored on each of the seven factors, plus an overall total quality score. The ECERS–R was constructed to overlap with NAEYC's core accreditation criteria covering many of the specific NAEYC accreditation standards. For example, in a study of 116 NAEYC-

accredited preschool classrooms, high ratings from the ECERS–R scores showed a positive correlation with NAEYC criteria (Zan, 2005).

The Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale

Just like ECERS–R, the ITERS–R (Harms et al., 1998) is designed to assess center-based childcare programs for infants and toddlers up to 30 months of age. The revised curriculum and program items in the ITERS–R include the following: helping children understand language; nature/science; use of TV, video, and computer; free play; and group play activities. Revised items have been added to make the scale more inclusive and culturally sensitive, to address professional needs of staff, and to reflect the latest health and safety information. The items and indicators remain the same as in the ITERS–R. The scale consists of 39 items organized into 7 subscales:

- Space and furnishings
- Personal care routines
- Listening and talking
- Activities
- Interaction
- Program structure
- Parents and staff

The NAEYC Accreditation System

Voluntary accreditation through NAEYC is one of the most recognized systems of measuring and promoting high quality in early childhood education. NAEYC ensures high

quality by enforcing 10 national standards that are further broken down into 417 criteria. The 10 standards are the following:

1. Relationships: The relationships between teachers and children are positive.
2. Curriculum: The curriculum is based on research.
3. Teaching: Teaching uses developmentally and culturally appropriate methods.
4. Assessment: The program provides ongoing and systematic formal and informal assessment of children's academic, social, and behavioral progress.
5. Health: The program promotes proper nutrition and proper education about health, which translates into preventive health measures and an overall healthy existence. Methods of health education include providing children with healthy snacks and teaching the children how to eat healthfully.
6. Teachers: The program employs teachers whose educational attainments are higher than state standards require (i.e., typically 12–18 units for state standards, and 50 units for NAEYC accreditation).
7. Families: The program establishes and maintains positive relationships with families to foster positive child development.
8. Community Relationships: The program ensures that children's communities play an important role in the children's day-to-day lives. For example, the program may include local public librarians offering educational presentations or firefighters demonstrating first aid for children and their families.
9. Physical Environment: The program ensures safe and positive indoor and outdoor environments.

10. Leadership and Management: The program effectively implements policies and procedures to ensure a stable staff and strong personnel.

Each of the 10 standards has multiple individual criteria to be internally and externally monitored for compliance, as multiple factors contribute to higher quality preschools. Although programs vary, the NAEYC preschool standards appear to be the most comprehensive system promoting quality early childhood programs that best prepare children for kindergarten and beyond.

> NAEYC accreditation is currently the most widely recognized sign of high-quality programs, and there are 9,273 NAEYC-accredited programs nationwide enrolling more than 800,000 children (NAEYC, 2010a); however, still, nationwide only about 8% of preschools are accredited by NAEYC. Despite strong evidence of the benefits of high-quality preschools, most preschools are not accredited and do not seek NAEYC or any other form of accreditation. Despite the clear economic and business advantages to being able to advertise as an NAEYC-accredited early childhood education center, and significant public awareness efforts by NAEYC, relatively few centers elect to pursue higher quality via NAEYC accreditation.

One reason is that the accreditation process is time and resource intensive. In recent years, NAEYC has raised standards for facility design, staff qualifications and programs, health and safety, and administration (Douglass-Fliess, 2011). One of the biggest financial challenges would be to hire teachers possessing the qualifications dictated by NAEYC criteria (e.g., attaining an AA degree), as these teachers would have to be paid significantly more than teachers who had earned only 12 semester college units (the Department of Social Services

minimum requirement). Another major financial challenge would be to offer prorated benefits to part-time employees (another NAEYC criteria). Further financial challenges would come in the form of teacher-to-student ratios: The NAEYC requires one teacher for every three infants, and one teacher for every nine preschoolers. The Department of Social Services, on the other hand, requires only one teacher for every four infants and one teacher for every 12 preschoolers (Ritchie, 2005).

A further financial burden would be presented by the ample amount of materials needed in classrooms, providing healthy, well-balanced snacks, ordering NAEYC accreditation materials, and paying the NAEYC fees, which can easily amount to well over $3,000 dollars. However, it is important to note that the NAEYC offers scholarship awards to preschools to cover fees for accreditation, based on the programs' financial need (Ritchie, 2005).

Among other criteria, health and safety standards are of major importance in NAEYC accreditation criteria. Unlike many other national organizations, the NAEYC requires routine cleaning and sanitation measures to prevent illness, safety precautions to prevent electric shock, regular checking of the reliability of smoke detectors and fire extinguishers, and similar precautions to ensure children's safety (NAEYC, 2008).

Although financial constraints can be one reason why most preschools do not seek NAEYC accreditation, NAEYC-accredited preschools come with many benefits, not only to the school itself and to staff and families, but also—most importantly—to children. Staff can benefit from higher salaries and better benefits (Bloom, 1996; McDonald, 2009; Whitebook, Sakai, & Howes, 2004), as well as better quality of work life (Bloom, 1996).

Children can benefit from the quality that NAEYC accreditation has been proven to offer (Apple, 2006; Gormley & Lucas, 2000; McDonald, 2009; NAEYC, 1995, 2009a, 2010a; Sanford- Brown, 2010; Whitebook et al., 2004), and the school can benefit from joining a national marketing program (the NAEYC-accredited program search on the NAEYC website). Additionally, NAEYC-accredited preschools in some states receive increased levels of funding from the government (Gormley & Lucas, 2000; Sanford-Brown, 2010)

Most programs require a minimum of 2 to 3 years to complete all four steps of the initial accreditation process. The four-step process asks preschools to enroll in a self-study, submit an application to complete candidacy materials within 1 year, and, if accepted as a candidate for accreditation, the preschool must meet NAEYC accreditation standards (80% of criteria in 10 areas) through evaluation site visits the following year. Thousands of preschools have participated in this quality-improvement process to the benefit of their students, parents, and centers. However, most preschools do not pursue NAEYC accreditation. Very little research has systematically explored the reasons and factors that may motivate or inhibit early childhood education administrators, teachers, and parents in terms of valuing and pursuing quality improvements leading to NAEYC accreditation.

This dissertation examines the barriers that prevent preschools from seeking NAEYC accreditation. A study of how one preschool successfully achieved NAEYC accreditation will suggest useful ways to encourage others to undergo the process as well, thereby increasing the number of NAEYC-accredited sites so more children will have access to high-quality preschools.

Statement of the Problem

In many American communities, children lack access to the high-quality public and private preschools that have consistently been shown to enhance school and life success. High-quality preschool experiences may help address the insidious achievement gap so prevalent in schools today. However, despite strong empirical evidence of the value of high-quality preschool experiences, the average early childhood program in the United States is considered poor-to-mediocre in quality (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2007; Rimm-Kaufman & Ponitz, 2009; Winter & Kelley, 2008). Very few private and public preschools are accredited by NAEYC—the primary nationally recognized organization that sets standards for high-quality preschool programs through accreditation of public and private centers. The United States has only 9,273 NAEYC-accredited programs, less than 8% of early childhood education programs nationwide.

NAEYC accreditation standards were designed to exceed minimum standards established by state licensing, which vary from one state to the other. Throughout the United States, early childhood programs have been encouraged to go beyond state licensing regulations. For unknown reasons, the majority of childcare centers in the United State do not pursue national accreditation. Clearly, there are factors that influence or prevent directors from pursuing NAEYC accreditation.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to document the factors that inhibit or influence the decision by preschool administrators, teachers, and parents to seek NAEYC accreditation and embark on the lengthy self-study and documentation process leading to NAEYC final approval. This study provides insights into the beliefs and perceptions of the

administration, teaching staff, and a group of parents at a private urban preschool in Los Angeles to understand how their views influenced the decision to seek and successfully achieve NAEYC accreditation. By studying the factors that prevent or shape the decision to pursue national accreditation, this research illuminates why so few preschools in the United States are NAEYC accredited despite strong evidence of the advantages of national certification. This study documented the process and negotiation among the different stakeholders in this childcare center leading to the decision to successfully obtain national accreditation, with the hope that this effort will encourage other nonaccredited centers to pursue NAEYC accreditation.

Significance of the Study

The questions addressed in this study are both timely and important for providing insight into the question of why many preschools are not actively pursuing NAEYC accreditation. Research is needed to explore the extent to which issues of cost, time commitment, achieving higher standards and teacher qualifications, and implementing developmentally and culturally appropriate practices discourage preschools from seeking accreditation. This study explored what risks or barriers administrators and teachers identify in terms of pursuing NAEYC accreditation, and how local factors shape the accreditation decision and quality-improvement process. It is important to better understand the context in which preschool quality improvements are undertaken so that early childhood educators can review local strategies to implement developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) that improve the quality of early childhood education.

Findings from this study are helpful for understanding how nonaccredited preschools and childcare centers decide whether to pursue accreditation, what DAP were adopted to implement quality-improvement efforts toward NAEYC accreditation, and how administrators, teachers, and parents perceive child and classroom environment outcomes following the successful accreditation process.

The findings from this dissertation are helpful in illuminating the key themes that need to be considered in the decision to pursue NAEYC standards and accreditation, its implementation, and evaluation of the accreditation process.

Research Questions

This study addressed three research questions about directors', teachers', and parents' perceptions of NAEYC accreditation:

1. What motivates or discourages preschool administrators in terms of pursuing NAEYC accreditation?
2. What changes do administrators, teachers, and parents believe accreditation will bring about at their preschool?
3. How do administrators', teachers', and parents' perceptions and evaluations of the preschool change following NAEYC accreditation?

Theoretical Framework

This research was based on Lev Vygotsky's (1978) socio-constructivist theory of child development. Socio-constructivism is a theory of learning that posits that the development of individual knowledge takes place first in a social context. The socio-constructivist view emphasizes the role of a more capable other and adult-child interaction in learning. Vygotsky

highlighted the role of adult-assisted children learning in their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where adults scaffold DAP to the children's level of performance to help them reach a level of learning beyond what they could discover alone. Vygotsky emphasized that for optimal development, adults must engage children in developmentally appropriate ways. Vygotsky's theory of child development offers a useful framework to guide the needed research on factors that influence the decision to undertake quality improvements and the lengthy NAEYC accreditation process. Vygotsky's theory underscores a key role for parents and teachers to provide DAP that support children's learning. Vygotsky (1978, 1986) argued that a child's development cannot be understood solely by studying the individual child, but that it is equally important to study the individual's learning environment. Vygotsky (1986) observed that mental functions developed in children through social interactions with adults. He theorized that learning takes place in the ZPD, wherein cognitive skills are fully learned only with adult guidance and facilitation. Vygotsky's theories formed the basis for educators and researchers such as Jerome Bruner (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976), whose concept of scaffolding refers to teaching strategies adjusted to a child's age and level of performance. This approach evolved into what educators today refer to as *DAP*.

The NAEYC concept of DAP is based on three theories related to how children develop and learn, including Piaget's developmental theory, information-processing theory, and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). Piaget's developmental theory considers a preschooler to be pre-operational, thus much emphasis is placed on the environment. Information-processing theory looks at the specific cognitive mechanics of children's problem solving and learning, and helps educators focus on curricular tasks and DAP

according to a child's cognitive level of performance (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). Perhaps most importantly, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory brings into play the preschoolers' interactions with adults and peers as the social and cultural context for learning and the ZPD. A key issue from Vygotsky's theory is the importance of play and interactions with adults in the child's learning environment (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997).

Therefore, DAP were incorporated into NAEYC early education quality and accreditation standards (NAEYC, 2010d) as a direct result of research and practices stimulated by Vygotsky's focus on the context of early development. NAEYC accreditation stresses the use of DAP in classrooms, curricula, and teaching strategies in an effort to raise preschool quality. Adherence to DAP is a key trait of high-quality preschool programs that produce more positive outcomes for young children (Baumgartner, Buchanan, & Casbergue, 2011; Frede & Barnett, 1992; Schweinhart et al., 1993).

The Early Childhood Classroom and ZPD

Vygotsky (1986) introduced the concept of ZPD to describe how a child can develop a skill with assistance, even though the skill is too difficult for the unassisted child to develop. Vygotsky described ZPD as a range of skills or responsibilities. The lower limit of ZPD is the level of skill the child can reach by working independently. The upper limit is the level of additional responsibility the child can accept with the assistance of an able instructor. In this way, Vygotsky emphasized how culture, play, and language form the ZPD in which a child constructs the mental models and understanding needed to develop cognitively. The preschool teacher and classroom form an important ZPD for the majority of children enrolled in early childhood education programs in the United States.

Vygotsky's ZPD (1986) reminds us that preschool is the context for a critical period of early learning. In the first 5 years of life, a child learns at the most rapid pace he or she will ever achieve (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Starr, 2002). Elkind (1987) and Zimiles (1986) expressed concern that some educators are not knowledgeable about the developmental needs of young children, and that educators perceive preschool as a simple downward extension of elementary education. Morgan (2000) warned that public preschools tend to focus too narrowly on direct instruction rather than on developmentally and culturally appropriate practices.

Nationwide, professional organizations such as the NAEYC have been defining the best preschool practices. Across the nation, preschool programs are encouraged to become NAEYC accredited. However, many programs resist or fail the accreditation process. As stated earlier, the significant educational problem of lagging achievement by some groups of United States children entering kindergarten can be addressed with high-quality preschools. However, preschools must engage children in developmentally appropriate ways. Efforts to raise preschool quality through NAEYC accreditation require new research to explore perceptions and beliefs about DAP, the NAEYC quality standards, and the accreditation process.

This study included interviewing preschool administrators, teachers, and parents of preschoolers about their concerns and experiences surrounding a successful NAEYC accreditation process at one large urban preschool in California.

Research Design and Methodology

The research questions chosen for this inquiry demanded a qualitative case study because they are capturing participant voices and experiences to determine what factors inhibit or influence preschool administrators, teachers, and parents to seek NAEYC accreditation.

This qualitative case study provides a systematic and in-depth study of administrators', teachers', and parents' perceptions of preschool quality, what motivated or discouraged the decision to undergo self-study and apply for NAEYC accreditation, and how accreditationchanged perceptions about the center and preschool programs.

The site for this qualitative research study was a private faith-based preschool center in Los Angeles, California. At the time of this study, the center cared for 70 children ranging in age from 6 weeks to 5.5 years old. The demographic of the families ranged from middle to working class. A total of eight classrooms had two teachers in each classroom. Two site supervisors reported to the executive director. The executive director reported to the governance board of the church.

There were a total of 12 participants for this study; five were preschool teachers who had been there throughout the NAEYC accreditation process, five were parents who had also been through the NAEYC accreditation process, plus the director of the preschool and one site supervisor. The participants were chosen using a purposeful sampling strategy.

Methods of data collection included classroom observation, fieldnotes, analysis of accreditation and self-study documents, and interviews and focus groups with the director, teachers, and parents of children about their experiences during and after the preschool NAEYC accreditation process. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed for subsequent

inductive analyses of responses. Data collected from interviews, focus groups, and observations were analyzed via inductive analysis.

Limitations

Time and resource constraints and the need to facilitate the level of rapport, time, and trust needed to conduct in-depth interviews and focus group interactions suggested that it was appropriate to limit the sample to one large preschool setting. The project scope involved recruitment of an appropriate preschool, gaining permission from the director and consent of participants, scheduling interviews and document reviews, and planning and outreach to contact parents and conduct all the interviews and focus groups. However, future studies building on the themes identified in this study may enlist a broader sample of multiple preschools with follow-up interviews in a longitudinal approach. However, due to the lack of prior data on this topic, conducting a qualitative case study of a single representative preschool was appropriate.

Definitions of Key Terms

Abecedarian Project: A longitudinal study conducted in North Carolina from 1972 to 1985 in which the researchers concluded that children who attend high-quality preschools have higher academic achievement than do children who attend no preschool.

California Department of Social Services: A department of the California state government whose mission is "to serve, aid, and protect needy and vulnerable children and adults in ways that strengthen and preserve families, encourage personal responsibility, and foster independence" (California Department of Social Services, 2007a, para. 1).

Child-Initiated Program: A type of curriculum that is constructed from children's needs and interests.

Community Care Licensing: A division of the California Department of Social Services that governs childcare centers.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP): An educational practice that the NAEYC has described based on three categories of knowledge (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997):

1. Knowledge of child development, age-related human characteristics, and children's learning processes.
2. Knowledge based on observation of individual children's strengths, interests, and needs.
3. Knowledge of the social and cultural contexts in which children live and learn.

Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS–R): A scale designed to assess group programs for children 2.5 to 5 years old.

Gap in Academic Achievement: The observed disparity in a number of educational measures between the performance of groups of students, especially groups defined by gender, race, ethnicity, ability, or socioeconomic status.

Head Start: The federal Head Start Program, which was created in 1965 an designed as a comprehensive child-development program that works with families to improve children's health, nutritional status, and social, emotional, and cognitive development.

High/Scope Perry Preschool Project: A longitudinal study conducted in Michigan from 1962 to 1967 in which the researchers concluded that high-quality preschools significantly affect

the intellectual and social development of children in poverty and that children who attend high-quality preschools commit fewer crimes in adulthood.

Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS–R): A thorough revision of the original ITERS, designed to assess center-based childcare programs for infants and toddlers up to 30 months of age.

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC): An association that has existed for 81 years and is well known for accrediting high-quality childcare or preschool centers in the United States.

NAEYC Accreditation: A 2-year voluntary accreditation offered by NAEYC for childcare centers that serve children from birth through age eight.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB): The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (2008), enacted on January 8, 2002, is federal legislation that enacts theories of education reform based on the belief that setting high standards and establishing measurable goals will improve individual outcomes in education. NCLB requires states to develop assessments in basic skills that must be administered to all students in certain grades if the states' schools are to receive federal funding.

Process Quality: The quality of interactions, activities, materials, learning opportunities, and health and safety routines. Process quality is the first dimension of measuring *program quality.*

Structural Quality: Group size, adult-child ratios, and the education and training of teachers and other staff members. Structural quality is the second dimension of measuring program quality.

Targeted Preschool: A preschool that is reserved for children at greatest risk of poor achievement because of economic disadvantage, disability, or other special needs.

Title V: A law authorizing government funding for early childhood education for disadvantaged children. Free public education for 3- to 5-year-olds.

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter one of this dissertation presented an introduction to the study, statement of the problem and background, the purpose of the study, theoretical framework, research questions, limitations, definitions of key terms, and organization of the dissertation. Chapter two presents a review of the literature on the long-term effects of preschool experiences during early childhood, the development of preschool public policy and national standards and accreditation agencies, and rationale for a qualitative case study. Chapter three presents a detailed description of the research design, methodology, procedures for data collection, analysis, and the project timeline. Chapter four describes the findings of the study and the way in which data were collected and analyzed. Chapter five summarizes and discusses the study and its implications for the research site as well as for further research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Vygotsky's Theory of Child Development

Vygotsky's sociocultural constructivist theory was advanced in Chapter one as a framework for the present research. Vygotsky (1978, 1986) emphasized the importance of a child's cultural background as an instrumental factor in the child's stage of development. That different cultures stress different types of social interactions challenged Piaget's concept of a universal hierarchy of learning stages. Vygotsky (1978) defined the ZPD as a child's range of proficiency in performing an overall task that would be too difficult for the child to perform without assistance. Vygotsky's viewpoint suggested that parents' interactions with children form a very specific sociocultural context and ZPD that results in social, emotional, and cognitive development. In contrast, other widely cited theories of child development, such as that of Piaget (see Flavell, 1967) and information-processing theory (Miller 2003), have focused more on children's developing cognitive and academic skills, but much less on social and cultural developmental contexts.

Elkind (1987) argued that when they impose their own learning priorities on young children, adults interfere with their self-directed learning, create guilt and anxiety, and stifle the children's intrinsic motivation to explore and experiment. According to theorists such as Bruner (1996), much of the success of high-quality preschool programs can be attributed to the constructivist approach to early childhood education.

In high-quality preschools that provide active hands-on learning of the kind that ispresently recommended by the NAEYC, children have interactive experiences on which they

can draw to improve their social, emotional, and cognitive abilities and future school success. Constructivist theory emphasizes the importance of enhancing student achievement by guiding children rather than giving them answers. Constructivist approaches to learning in preschool include practices such as scaffolding, cooperative learning, project learning, discovery learning, and learning through hands-on activities.

In a developmentally appropriate environment, children participate in the activities that interest them, and their abilities develop. According to Vygotsky (1986), children who learn independently usually are working at the lower level of their ZPDs, because children benefit from adult guidance and scaffolding. Knowledge of a child's ZPD adds to DAP as a way of building knowledge and skills that can only be acquired with the assistance of a more capable other. Vygotsky said that being instructed in a particular concept can help a child develop more mature cognitive abilities. According to Vygotsky's theory (1978), learning precedes development, rather than development preceding learning. Concerning the formation of complex thought processes, Vygotsky (1986) explained:

> One word may in different situations have different or even opposite meanings as long as there is some associative link between them. Thus, a child may say *before* for both before or after, or *tomorrow* for both tomorrow and yesterday. (pp. 127–128)

To illustrate, one can think of a time when a child verbally repeats after a teacher without truly conceptualizing the meaning of the teacher's words. This is rote memorization without concept formation. However, according to Vygotsky (1986), children develop concepts in a very different way: "Memorizing words and connecting them with objects does not in itself lead to concept formation: For the process to begin, a problem must arise that cannot be solved otherwise than through the formation of new concepts" (p. 100).

Both Piaget and Vygotsky found that very little benefit comes from a child copying a pattern. According to both theorists, when children perform such a task they benefit only slightly in terms of cognitive growth. To develop concepts, the children must experience complex environments and notions. For example, children understand and benefit much more if they experience rain in a meaningful context than if they merely talk about rain in a group discussion (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997).

Two unique features of a developmentally appropriate environment are that children are encouraged to play in large uninterrupted blocks of time, and they are allowed to move through learning centers at their own pace while teachers interact with them by asking questions, discussing the activities, and adding materials.

The NAEYC guidelines for early childhood education have imposed this child-centered approach with successful results. The original guidelines were based on Piagetian principals of recommending open-ended opportunities for children in exploring concrete materials and interacting with one another while teachers served as resources for the children's self-initiated learning (Bredekamp, 1987). Teaching basic skills was not emphasized; the skills emerged only in combination with everyday activities. The modified guidelines follow the Vygotskian social constructivist approach, in which teachers play a significant guiding role in children's learning while preserving children's freedom of choice and self-initiation of activities (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997).

In Vygotsky's (1986) sociocultural theory, social experiences shape students' ways of thinking about and interpreting the world. According to Vygotsky's (1986) socio-constructivist theory, a child's intellect and moral understanding are "constructed" by

internalizing concepts and by self-discovery, leading each child to a unique interpretation based on personal experiences, knowledge, cognition, and beliefs.

Vygotsky promoted nontraditional teaching in which teachers simply facilitate or scaffold learning rather than directing students, either inside or outside the classroom environment. Before children become independently proficient in a task, they rely on adults for assistance in performing the task. When this assistance is selective in nature, it is called scaffolding. It is a way of assisting children by simply guiding their performance without too much intrusion and aid (Tharp & Gallimore, 1995). Vygotsky's theory of ZPD (1986) emphasizes the importance of adults in a student's life. Using the notion of ZPD, teachers instruct students in concepts that are beyond their current skill and knowledge; this aid motivates the students to try harder and go beyond their present level of understanding.

In Vygotskian terms, teaching is good only when it "awakens and rouses to life those functions which are in a stage of maturing, which lie in the zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1956, p. 278). The importance of interacting with students from other cultures is expressed in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which holds that humans are rooted in a sociocultural milieu; hence, human behavior cannot be understood independently from human upbringing (Vygotsky, 1978).

Vygotsky considered child behavior a combination of biological and sociocultural functions in which culture determines the knowledge and skills that children need to acquire and gives them the necessary tools (i.e., language, technology, and strategies) for functioning within the culture. In addition to the theories of Vygotsky and Piaget, information-processing theory is influential in modern school psychology. This view is concerned primarily with children's

short-and long-term memories, and how children use specific cognitive strategies to solve problems. The focal point in information-processing theory is children's cognitive ability to understand and learn as they mature. An approach that considers a series of steps for processing information is called *information processing* (Anderson, Foster, & Frisvold, 2005). The idea behind information-processing theory is that following a series of steps creates meaningful connections between pieces of information while generating complex thought processes. When considering DAP, information-processing theory can be helpful where curricula are considered in terms of specific demands on a child's attention, memory, and problem-solving skills (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997).

As mentioned by Bredekamp and Copple (1997), young children often face difficulties trying to concentrate on or recall multiple steps of a process. Information-processing theory therefore is often considered in conjunction with theories such as those of Piaget and Vygotsky. The connection lies in the way information-processing theory explains thought processes of young children, whereas Piaget's theory suggests ways to understand children's different mental operations as cognitive processes that will help the children expand knowledge by acting within the early environment, and Vygotsky's theory reminds us to attend to the social contexts for early learning.

In conclusion, high-quality preschools provide active hands-on learning that is presently recommended by the NAEYC; and the newly modified NAEYC accreditation guidelines follow the Vygotskian social constructivist approach (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). How have Vygotsky's approach and the newly modified NAEYC guidelines influenced the field of early

education? To answer this question, we must look at the current state and quality of early childhood education programs.

Current State and Quality of Early Childhood Education Programs

Early childhood education has evolved from home-based childcare to high-quality early education and preschool programs that foster academic, social, emotional, physical, cognitive, and language development in children from birth to age five. High-quality preschool programs promote the development of diverse academic skills that prepare children for successful entry into kindergarten and beyond. With many new early education programs sprouting all over the United States, researchers have begun investigating the characteristics of programs that yield the most positive results. Many studies, such as those reviewed here, found that high-quality early childhood education promoted children's positive academic and social development, prepared the young children to succeed in kindergarten, and launched them on a more optimal and successful developmental trajectory. Likewise, lack of access to quality preschool programs was shown to have a negative effect on the healthy development and school readiness of children.

The review of long-term longitudinal studies such as the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project and the Abecedarian Project, and studies of the federal Head Start program provides evidence of the long-term individual benefits and cost savings to society from high-quality preschool education programs (Barnett et al., 2005; Helburn, 1995; NICHD, 2000, 2002; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Along with the strong research evidence for positive academic and social benefits for children who attend quality preschool programs, studies have observed more academic and social difficulties for disadvantaged children who did not attend a quality preschool program. Children from low-income families who did not attend a preschool were followed longitudinally and later did not do as well in school, were more likely to be arrested, more likely to be single parents, and earned less than comparable students who attended preschool programs (Schweinhart et al., 1993).

Every year, thousands of children enter public kindergartens with language and basic skills delays (Ramey & Ramey, 2004), and those children who enter school lagging their peers tend to remain delayed (Kainz & Vernon-Feagans, 2007). Thus, preschools are clearly beneficial, especially for disadvantaged children. Quality is the key for programs to have sustained positive impacts. High-quality programs go beyond meeting basic needs. They provide meaningful learning activities, foster language development, and nurture secure, caring relationships between children and their teachers/caregivers. In addition, high-quality programs provide teachers who have certified qualifications and offer a healthy and safe school environment. These are important considerations, because more than 40% of 3- to 5-year-olds are enrolled in out-of-home care in the United States (US Department of Education, 2010).

Another way that quality preschools benefit children and families is by helping to reduce academic and behavior problems in later school years, which also provides significant cost savings to the overall public school system. In one early study, high-quality preschool programs were estimated to save the government $13,000 to $19,000 per child above the cost of the preschool programs themselves (Sawhill, 1999). Research shows that investing in these high-

quality preschool programs yields benefits to children that exceed the preschool costs themselves (Espinosa, 2002). In California, the "First 5 California Bill" committed $100 million to promote university Preschool for All Demonstration Projects statewide in 2003. Evaluation of these preschool programs suggested future cost savings of between two and four dollars for every dollar invested in high-quality preschool programs (RAND Corporation, 2005).

This chapter reviews important longitudinal research showing that high-quality preschool education (a) saves public money because it decreases the need for children to enroll in special- education programs in school during later childhood and adolescence; and (b) ensures the child greater economic and socioemotional success later in adulthood (Barnett et al., 2005; Frede & Barnett, 1992; Helburn, 1995; NICHD, 2000, 2002; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001; Schweinhart et al., 1993; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Waldfogel, 2006).

Despite the known benefits of quality preschool programs, many eligible children do not attend quality preschool programs, and few preschools undertake rigorous quality assurance efforts leading to NAEYC national accreditation. Regrettably, the average quality of currently available preschool programs is not satisfactory. Only 15%–25% of all early education and childcare centers in the United States are considered of good or excellent quality (Vandell & Wolfe, 2000), and most disadvantaged children who attend preschools attend low-quality programs (Espinosa, 2002). Clearly, efforts are needed to increase access to high-quality preschools programs for all children. Many children are enrolled in preschool, but not enough of the preschools are meeting the standards for high-quality and developmentally appropriate curricula and practices.

Federal programs such as Head Start provide healthy nutrition and early education to about one million children aged three to five (US Department of Health & Human Services, 2011). Head Start, initiated as part of the war on poverty, provides publicly funded education for preschool children of low-income families, and access to medical, dental, mental health, nutrition, and other social services (Smolensky & Gootman, 2003). According to Blau (2001), Head Start enhances children's health, nutrition, overall learning, and socioemotional development.

During the 2009-2010 program year, Head Start programs enrolled 983,809 children aged four to five, and 133,878 infant to 3-year-olds in Early Head Start. Approximately 9%–11% of 3- to 4-year-old American children attended Head Start programs. As the federal Head Start Program is designated for families living in poverty, a more meaningful participation figure is that 19% of the eligible children aged three to four from targeted poor neighborhoods attended Head Start (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2005).

California Head Start enrolled 86,263 and 12,759, respectively, in Early Head Start. This is a small proportion of the 2.5 million children under the age of five living in California (US Department of Health & Human Services, 2011). Thus, the question that emerges is what happens with the rest of children who would benefit from high-quality preschool programs?

Many children are enrolled in private pre-K programs, but a substantial number of these programs are not considered high quality. The Cost, Quality, and Outcomes Study (Yazejian, Dyler, Rustici, & Zelazo, 1999) examined early childhood education centers in four states and found the average quality as rated by ECERS–R to be 4.2 (on a scale of 1–7). This large-scale study of typical programs showed that only 24% of the programs had total scores

in the “good” to “excellent” range (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 1999). A more recent study of more than 600 preschools nationwide showed that more than 60% of the children were attending programs that were rated as being of mediocre-to-low quality (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2007). Research is needed to determine why more private centers do not undertake needed quality improvements.

In recent years, the high participation of women with young children in the labor force has been accompanied by a high demand for childcare and other early childhood education programs. The emerging consensus among educators and parents is that young children should receive quality early educational experiences, and an accumulation of research evidence shows that good preschool experiences positively impact school learning. These factors have greatly increased demand for high-quality preschools (National Research Council, 2001). However, as stated earlier, only 9%–11% of 3- to 4-year-olds in the United States attended Head Start programs, and less than about 8% of early care programs are NAEYC accredited (McDonald, 2009). For this reason, understanding the history of preschool education and the struggle to define and encourage high-quality preschool programs in the United States is exigent.

History of Early Childhood Education

In 1830, a petition to formally incorporate “infant schools” into the Boston Public Schools was rejected by Boston’s Primary School Committee. Opposing this petition were primary school teachers who maintained that infants and toddlers were difficult to manage. Mental health specialists and child-rearing advisers also argued that excessive early stimulation was damaging to children. Despite this hindrance, as historian Maris Vinovskis documented

(Brosterman, 1977), many 3- and 4-year-olds in Massachusetts attended public schools until the mid-19th century, toddling along after their older siblings if the teachers did not object. However, the numbers declined in the late 19th century, as urban schools became more age graded and academically standardized.

When Elizabeth Peabody started the nation's first English-speaking public kindergarten in Boston in 1860, she overcame resistance to the idea of early childhood education by adopting German educator Friedrich Froebel's felicitous sounding "children's garden" as the name of her enterprise, emphasizing that a kindergarten was an appropriate place for young children—not a school. However, her effort lasted only a year because the local superintendent of schools thought it was too costly. Nearly 30 years later, the Boston Public Schools incorporated privately funded "charity" kindergartens, but, as with most urban kindergartens, these were seen primarily as programs for the children of the poor (Brosterman, 1977).

With the goal of bringing public kindergartens to all the nation's children, Bessie Locke founded the National Kindergarten Association (NKA) in New York City in 1909 (Helburn & Bergmann, 2002). As Locke was not a professional educator, she avoided conflicts within the kindergarten movement by enlisting prominent businessmen, college presidents, and education reformers such as John Dewey. Taking its case to Washington, DC, the NKA persuaded the US Commissioner of Education to let the organization establish and fund the Kindergarten Bureau within the US Bureau of Education. When Locke's attempts to get a kindergarten bill through Congress failed, she refocused her efforts at the state level by waging media campaigns and rallying local parent-teacher organizations, church groups, and governors' wives. Although

money was always an impediment in local politics, Locke's efforts over four decades contributed to a 300% increase in the number of children nationwide attending public or private kindergarten (Helburn & Bergmann, 2002).

It took national emergencies to spur further federal action. During the Great Depression, the US Works Progress Administration (WPA) sponsored "emergency nursery schools" for 3- and 4-year-olds. This effort was seen primarily as a jobs program for working parents of young children. Psychologists and nursery educators hoped that the public schools—where many of the nursery schools were located—would adopt the programs as their own. But, as happened in Boston a century earlier, few public school systems were receptive to the idea. Then, with the onset of World War II, new federal money was made available for "children's centers." Enabled by the Lanham Act during World War II, the WPA created nursery schools and childcare programs. However, these programs were not permanent and most closed when President Truman cut funding 6 months after World War II ended (Gordon, 1978).

Head Start Programs

In post-WWII America, another national emergency—the war on poverty—and new psychological research on the benefits of early education led to the founding of Head Start in 1965. Head Start began with a $96.4 million budget and served 561,000 children during the early years. Throughout the late 1960s, funding and the number of children served grew gradually. Although, there were some reductions and funding in the early 1970s, by 1979 the Head Start budget had reached $680 million. Ten years later, the program's budget was $1.2 billion, and services were being provided to more than 450,000 children throughout the United States and its territories. ("Head Start History," n.d.)

The Human Service Reauthorization Act in 1990 drastically increased Head Start funding in order to serve all eligible 4-year-olds and 30% of eligible 5-year-olds by 1994. The Head Start Reauthorization Act of 1994 expanded Head Start still further and proposed yet another funding increase. Head Start's appropriation for 1995 was $3.53 billion to provide service to some 752,000 children. The appropriation for Fiscal Year 2000 climbed to more than $5.2 billion to serve Head Start and Early Head Start children and their families. The current budget is $6.8 billion ("Head Start History," n.d.).

Research on the Benefits of High-Quality Preschools

Several longitudinal studies were important in highlighting the crucial value of preschool education. The studies showed that children (especially children from low-income households) who attended high-quality preschool programs boosted their academic and life outcomes in contrast to children who did not receive a high-quality preschool experience (Blau, 2001; Blau & Currie, 2006; Currie, 2001). Some of the earliest studies were the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project in Michigan, conducted from 1962 to 1967 (Schweinhart et al., 2005), and the Abecedarian Project in North Carolina and California from 1972 to 1985 (Abadiano & Turner, 2005). Both studies showed more optimal academic performance in children's reading, writing, and mathematics; fewer behavioral referrals than children who did not attend preschools; and better retention and high school graduation rates for the children who started out in quality preschool programs. Childcare settings considered to be of low quality did not show the same positive benefits as those found for children attending high-quality preschools (Abadiano & Turner, 2005).

The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study

The High/Scope Perry study (Schweinhart et al., 2005) assessed children who attended a 2-year preschool program for 3- and 4-year-olds from low-income families. The teachers had bachelor's degrees and certificates in early childhood education, with only five or six children per class (a better student-teacher ratio than is required by most states). Teachers used the High/Scope Perry educational model in daily 2.5-hour classes and visited the children and their families weekly. In the High/Scope Perry model, the teacher provides small- and large-group activities, helps children engage in key experiences in child development, and arranges the classroom and daily schedule to support children's self-initiated learning activities. The teachers in the High/Scope Perry study received regular training and support in their use of the High/Scope Perry model (Schweinhart et al., 2005).

The High/Scope Perry Preschool Project (Schweinhart et al., 1993) found that this type of high-quality preschool experience significantly improved the intellectual and social development of children living in poverty compared to children who did not attend preschool. The High/Scope Perry Preschool Project confirmed the effectiveness of a high-quality preschool experience for 123 African-American 3- to 4-year-olds from low-income households. The children were divided into control and experimental groups. The experimental group received high-quality preschool education with emphasis on language, literacy, mathematics, social relations, and parent-teacher interaction, including regular home visits. Each teacher was responsible for six students and was trained in supervision and the provided curriculum. The outcome of the project was momentous: 71% of the experimental group versus 54% of the control group graduated from high school; 59% of the

experimental group versus 80% of the control group received welfare; and 57% of the experimental group had babies out of wedlock, compared to 83% from the control group. Reports of the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project emphasized that children attending high-quality preschools committed fewer crimes in adulthood than the no-preschool comparisons. This finding offers an example of how earlier studies approached the impact of preschool from the perspective of a "deficit model," which perceives low-income families of color as lacking educational and family values. This emphasis on crime and behavior "traits" has been replaced in contemporary research with a more positive focus on children's resilience.

Nevertheless, this early longitudinal study of young children was an important benchmark that underscored the better academic and behavioral-social outcomes for children attending high-quality preschools. The implication of this long-term study was that all young children from low-income families should have access to high-quality preschool programs with features similar to the High/Scope model.

The Abecedarian Project

The Abecedarian project was a longitudinal study of preschool-age children conducted from 1972 to 1985 (Abadiano & Turner, 2005). This study found that children who attended high-quality preschools had higher academic achievement than children who did not attend preschool. The project was one of the first carefully controlled scientific studies monitoring the potential benefits of early childhood education for poor minority children. Four cohorts of children born between 1972 and 1977 were randomly assigned as infants to either an intervention group or a control group. Children in the intervention group received full-time high-quality educational intervention in a childcare setting from infancy through age five. Each

child had an individualized prescription of educational activities, which consisted of games incorporated into the child's day. The games' activities focused on social, emotional, and cognitive areas of development, with particular emphasis on language development. Children's progress was monitored over time with follow-up studies conducted at ages 12, 15, and 21 years.

The main finding of the Abecedarian Project was that important benefits lasting at least into young adulthood were strongly associated with attending the early childhood intervention program. Compared to children in the control group, chose who participated in the intervention had higher cognitive test scores from the toddler years to age 21. The IQ scores of the children who participated in the study were significantly increased as a result of participation. At age 21, participants in the program displayed higher rates of college and university enrollment in comparison to the control group. This study thus shows the long-term effects of high-quality preschools. Academic achievement in reading and mathematics was higher from the primary grades through young adulthood. Children in the intervention group completed more years of education; were more likely to attend a 4-year college; and in adulthood, the intervention children were older, on average, when their first child was born (Abadiano & Turner, 2005).

The academic and socioemotional benefits of the Abecedarian intervention program also were found to be stronger than the benefits of most other early childhood programs. This finding may be due to the program's emphasis on language development. In particular, enhanced language development appears to have been instrumental in raising cognitive test scores. The benefit of the intervention program also extended to the children's families.

Mothers of children who participated in the intervention achieved higher educational and employment status than mothers of children in the control group. These results were especially pronounced for teenage mothers (Abadiano & Turner, 2005).

The major conclusion from the High/Scope Perry and Abecedarian projects was that high-quality preschool programs for young children contribute to the children's intellectual and social development in childhood, their later success in school, and their economic performance in adulthood. Overall, the study indicated that the return to the public on its initial investment in such programs is not only substantial, but also larger than previously estimated (Abadiano & Turner, 2005).

Recent Studies

In addition to the High/Scope Perry and Abecedarian Preschool Projects, more recent studies in the United States and abroad have demonstrated the importance of high-quality preschool education in improving children's short- and long-term success in school and adult life (Barnett et al., 2007). A number of studies have documented positive long-term effects, including higher achievement test scores, higher educational attainment, increased adult productivity, and decreased crime and delinquency. The RAND Corporation conducted a third-party study, which concluded that disadvantaged children–who need preschool the most–usually cannot participate in high-quality preschools because funding is unavailable for increasing the quality and quantity of these much-needed preschools. Furthermore, RAND Corporation concluded that, if it is ever to close the achievement gap, the United States must start with early childhood education by providing universal preschool for all young children (Karoly, 2009).

Barnett et al. (2007) likewise argued that making high-quality preschools available for all children is a human right.

Early data on the positive effects of Head Start programs for low-income children were challenged due to the lack of randomized assignment of participants. LaParo and Pianta (2000) pointed out that to estimate the effects of Head Start it is necessary to compare children in Head Start to a comparable matched control group of children who do not attend Head Start but whose families resemble the families of children in the treatment group in socioeconomic status and other factors. More recently, controlled longitudinal studies of Head Start programs addressed these methodological issues and continued to support the validity of the earlier research confirming Head Start's effectiveness (Hale, Seitz, & Zigler, 1990; McKey et al., 1985).

Sound research–including carefully designed longitudinal studies–provides strong evidence that the preschool years are critical (Purves, 1994) and that children who attend high-quality preschool programs show improved cognitive development and academic achievement in school (Bartik, 2006; Ceci, 1991; Ramey & Ramey, 1998). For example, Gormley, Gayer, Phillips, and Dawson (2005) found that a universal preschool program in Oklahoma improved school readiness for four ethnic groups of preschoolers (White, Hispanic, Black, and Native American) across a wide range of family economic levels. In a follow-up study, Gormley (2007) found that Hispanic students showed significant gains in reading, writing, and math skills. This is important because Hispanics are the fastest growing ethnic group in the United States, with dramatic growth occurring in the 3- to 5-year-old age group (US Department of Education, 2005).

A review of several longitudinal research studies shows that preschool programs for young children result in meaningful, lasting effects on cognitive, social, and school outcomes (Barnett, 2011). However, not all programs are equally effective, and specifically the higher quality programs produce the most optimal results.

Interestingly, the most critical factor appears to be in the areas of preschool teacher training and the implementation of developmentally appropriate teaching methods (Barnett, 2011). So-called direct instruction—in contrast to more child-centered programs—was associated with greater cognitive gains in the U.S. (Melhuishet et al., 2008; Ramey et al., 2000) and international research (Berlinski, Galiani, & Gertler, 2009; Burger, 2010; Schweinert, 2005; Spiess, Buchel, & Wagner, 2003).

Direct instruction is teacher directed, focused on teaching very specific skills, and is highly scripted. It is a type of intentional teaching and requires teachers to carefully determine how and when to teach each skill. This involves utilization of DAP, shown by the research to be a central characteristic of the most effective preschool programs. Both the High/Scope Perry and Abecedarian projects employed intentional teaching, including direct instruction. The recent studies cited previously replicated earlier findings of strong cognitive, social, and academic outcomes for students who attended a quality preschool program at age four that included intentional teaching and DAP. Surprisingly, despite claims that starting earlier is better, starting early education interventions before age three did not appear to be a major contributor to program effectiveness (Barnett, 2011; Reynolds, 1995).

According to Rimm-Kaufman and Ponitz (2009), many young children in the United States attend low-quality preschools. In a study of more than 600 preschools, more than 60% of the children were found to be attending programs that were of mediocre- to low-quality (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2007). Although most preschools meet children's basic needs, many provide only rare opportunities for cognitive development and stimulation (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001). Research has shown that many parents do not evaluate the quality of early childhood programs and do not realize that their children's limited early education was a factor in their falling behind in school (Currie, 2001).

The Cultural-Deficit Perspective and Early Childhood Education

As the student population of the United States continues to become more ethnically diverse, one of the biggest challenges facing education is how to provide successful academic experiences for all children. It is expected that by 2020, two thirds of public school children will be African American, Asian American, Hispanic, or Native American. Meanwhile, comparison studies consistently show that the achievement gap between minorities and their White counterparts is growing (US Department of Education, 2000).

Due to the ever-increasing diversity of children in the United States, more and more children are entering kindergarten with pre-existing major academic and socioemotional delays. Studies predict that the achievement gap can be narrowed and even closed if all students enter kindergarten ready to begin socially, emotionally, academically, and physically. Significant studies prove how quality preschools can help children prepare for kindergarten in all four domains (Abadiano & Turner, 2005; Barnett et al., 2007; Bartik, 2006; Gormley, 2007; Karoly, 2009; Schweinhart et al., 1993; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

During the 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement and the War on Poverty caused early childhood professionals to look for solutions to the social needs of children and their families. Since then, research surrounding early childhood education has viewed the field through the cultural-deficit perspective and the theories of cultural deprivation that emerged in the context of the War on Poverty in the 1960s (Countryman & Elish-Piper, 1998).

In 1964, Benjamin Bloom published a book titled *Stability and Change in Human Characteristics,* which suggested that about half of human intelligence is determined by the time a child turns 4 years old. Countryman and Elish-Piper (1998) noted that this finding led to "the notion of a critical period for optimum stimulation and early learning, in which whatever was or was not happening to young children from lower-class and poor families was considered deficient, harmful and in need of remediation." (p. 49). Since then, early intervention programs funded by the government have rushed to target at-risk children, and by targeting only low-income families, it suggests that these children and their families are somehow deficient.

In addition, many states have funded public preschool programs for children identified as at-risk. Many educators and academics strongly object to using the term *at-risk* because it labels certain minorities. As Swadener and Lubeck (1995) argued:

> Their premise is that the generalized use of the at-risk label is highly problematic and implicitly racist, classist, and ableist, a 1990's version of the cultural-deficit model which locates problems or "pathologie" in individuals, families, and communities rather than institutional structures that create and maintain equality. (p. 57)

Furthermore, Swadener and Lubeck (1995) have stated that the deficit model ascribes deficiencies to the individual and family rather than preparing the school to serve the ever-growing diverse population. Additionally, Taylor (1983) argued that by targeting only the

low- income, nonmainstream families, rather than all families, the model gives the impression that there is something wrong with these families.

Bowman (1994) stated that most poor and minority families are not at-risk for developmental failure; instead, they are fully able to exercise their human talents and abilities as they interact with their own environments. The risk for these children lies instead in the disconnect between schools and the economically and culturally diverse students, families, and communities they serve.

The Human-Capital Approach

Numerous longitudinal and seminal studies in the field of early childhood education have viewed the importance of providing quality childcare through the deficit lens of preschool's impact on children considered human capital. For example, studies such as the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project, the Abecedarian Project, and the Chicago Child-Parent Centers study have shown that, compared to children who do not attend preschool, children who attend high-quality preschools have lower crime rates and lower dependence on the welfare system in adolescence and adulthood. Therefore, access to high-quality early childhood education would not only ensure educational success for American children, it would save American taxpayers billions of dollars that are currently being spent to address the harmful consequences of poor education.

Cultural-Deficit Theory

According to Darder (1991), efforts to create and maintain a high-quality universal preschool policy for all children have largely failed because of deficit views of why universal preschool should be created and why minority children fail to thrive in school.

Traditional attempts to address the reasons why minority children are not excelling are divided into two arguments: (a) nature (i.e., genetics) and (b) nurture (i.e., environment). Most conservatives have argued that genetics are responsible for minority students' underachievement. On the other hand, most liberals have argued that deficits in minority students' environments—in particular, cultural deprivation and poverty—are the root causes that hinder students' success.

According to Darder (1991), decades of reform have not altered the basic injustice of the American educational system. However, this failure of reform does not mean that the conservative view is legitimate. Rather, educational reform has failed because both liberals and conservatives have repeatedly blamed students and their environments, rather than blaming flaws in the educational system. Clearly the conservative view strongly preserves the status quo of the privileged. Maintaining the status quo has been justified by fallacious doctrines that promote meritocracy, tracking, intelligence testing, ability grouping, and culturally insensitive teacher expectations and curricula (Darder, 1991). On the other hand, liberals want to correct the "problem," but at the hidden cost of the minorities. For example, liberals believe in the capitalist system and think that through compensatory programs and reform policies such as Head Start, state-funded preschool programs, and targeted programs, the problem will be solved.

Until the government and educators are able to look at poverty as an environmental condition that their programs can influence—rather than as a personal attribute—deficit perspectives will persevere. Attaining a college degree and a certain amount of experience are now not enough to enable teachers to successfully prepare children academically. Courses in

parent-teacher communication, active listening, cultural sensitivity, and conflict resolution must be included in teacher education programs.

The NAEYC

In the 1920s, concern about the varying quality of emerging nursery school programs in the United States prompted Patty Smith Hill to gather prominent experts in the field of early childhood education to decide how to best ensure the existence of high-quality programs.

Meeting in Washington, DC, in 1929, the group published the manual *Minimum Essentials for Nursery Education* (NANE, 1929), which set out standards and methods acceptable for nursery schools. Three years later, the group founded a professional association of nursery school experts, named the National Association for Nursery Education (NANE). NANE changed its name to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) in 1964 and began issuing early education guidelines in 1981 (NAEYC, 2010b).

Today, NAEYC has existed for 81 years and has recently broadened its work to include national child-development conferences. The NAEYC publishes a professional journal and many books relating to the education of young children, and it is active in public policy work. It is well known for accrediting high-quality childcare or preschool centers. At present, it accredits more than 7,000 childcare programs, preschools, early learning centers, and other center- or school-based programs in early childhood education. These programs provide high-quality care and education to nearly one million children (NAEYC, 2010a, 2010b). It has been documented that accredited centers that voluntarily meet high standards, such as those set by the NAEYC Academy, are of higher quality than nonaccredited centers (NAEYC, 1995, 2009a). However,

the Unites States currently has over 7,000 NAEYC-accredited early childhood education centers, which represents only about 8% of U.S. preschool programs that are NAEYC accredited (NAEYC, 2011).

NAEYC Accreditation

Armed with research-based standards, resources for improving program quality, and enhanced professional development and working conditions for staff members, NAEYC has become the top organization in the United States promoting high-quality early childhood education nationwide. However, the organization's efforts do not end with improving programs and staff; they extend to educating parents and the general public about the need for high-quality early childhood education. The success of the NAEYC's voluntary accreditation system in promoting excellence in education for children aged 0–8 is partially due to the organization's practice of working with other organizations in providing detailed position statements and comprehensive online resources. By stating that their goal is high-quality education for all children, the NAEYC acknowledges the need to include all children with no exceptions. NAEYC programs include children who have developmental disabilities; children of all cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds; and children who have individual learning styles, strengths, and needs. The strong values of the program emerge not only from research but also from experienced professional understanding (NAEYC, 2010c).

The NAEYC program standards and accreditation criteria cover four areas of concentration. The principal area is children, followed by teaching staff, partnerships, and administrators. The program's durable and effective support structure, based on these areas of

concentration, promotes program accountability and insures productive and sustainable classroom learning (NAEYC, 2010a).

The NAEYC Accreditation Process

The process leading to NAEYC accreditation is usually initiated by a program director and can take more than 2 years to complete. There are three required components: self-study, on-site validation, and the commission decision (NAEYC, 2010d, Overview of Process section). The self-study process is the most comprehensive component and begins when the director orders the NAEYC's accreditation materials and introduces the concept of accreditation to families and staff members. Once introductions have been made, the director and staff members typically make a detailed plan. They collect skeletal information such as (a) an early childhood classroom observation in each classroom; (b) an early childhood administrator report; (c) a completed open-ended family questionnaire; and (d) a completed open-ended teacher questionnaire. The director then uses this information to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the program and to formulate with the staff a plan for improving the program. Making this improvement plan generally demands most of the work. The plan might require teachers to complete training in their areas of weakness, restructure their routines, or maintain safety standards, as detailed in the observation tool. If parents mention a specific weakness, the staff at the center must address the issue as a team (NAEYC, 2010d).

After the improvement plan has been implemented, the director and teachers are ready to begin the next steps: (a) repeat the classroom observation, (b) complete the administrator report, (c) distribute and collect the family questionnaire, and (d) distribute the teacher questionnaire. Results of the completed questionnaires are tallied on summary sheets. The forms are more

detailed than those collected during the first step; they ask each individual to report whether specific criteria are fully met, partially met, or not met. This information creates the program description that is then sent to the NAEYC Academy for Early Childhood Program Accreditation (NAEYC, 2010d).

When it receives the program description, the NAEYC Academy assigns an evaluation validator to the program, who then contacts the program director and schedules an on-site observation. The monitoring observation takes place over the course of 2 days, during which time the validator observes a classroom in session, meets with the director to ask additional questions, and then sends a report to the academy. The validator's purpose is to validate that all accreditation self-study documentation is complete and accurate and to add objective classroom observations for the academy's final review. In this review, a three-person commission considers the validated program description in a blind review and makes the accreditation decision based on the commission's professional judgment (NAEYC, 2010d).

Programs that are in substantial compliance (i.e., those who have achieved a minimum of 80% of all 10 standards) with the accreditation criteria are granted accreditation for an initial period of 5 years. Or, if the commission determines that too few criteria are fully met, accreditation may be deferred. In this case, the applicant can appeal the decision or can make changes as suggested and resubmit its program description. Programs that resubmit the description have a specified amount of time to make changes in their weak areas, and then a validator returns for a second observation. If it is denied accreditation after a second monitoring

visit and still seeks accreditation, a program must repeat the entire process from the beginning. As outlined earlier, accreditation involves a lengthy self-study and quality-improvement process at many levels, and is such a challenging undertaking that most preschools do not pursue NAEYC accreditation. As a result, many preschool programs greatly vary in quality in terms of their staff training, facilities, and early childhood programs.

States also commend voluntary NAEYC accreditation, a process that includes unannounced inspections by NAEYC validators. However, in part due to the associated costs, less than 8% of early childhood center-based programs are NAEYC accredited (McDonald, 2009). Because the licensing organizations concentrate on limited features–such as structure–that are easy to monitor, their process requires less money and effort than does accreditation.

Furthermore, licensing standards usually require meeting only basic health and safety codes, without distinguishing a program that barely meets the requirements from one that far exceeds them. In contrast, NAEYC accreditation sets higher standards of quality, and considers not only structural but also process features of the program, such as teaching via DAP.

Developmentally Appropriate Practices

Prominent child-development theorists such as Maria Montessori, Lev Vygotsky, Arnold Gesell, Jean Piaget, and David Elkind have described a variety of tenets that characterize high-quality preschools. One important tenet is adherence to DAP. Among other formalities and regulations of the NAEYC, maintaining a DAP-based curriculum is paramount. Many influential professional organizations, such as the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards, the International Reading Association,

and the National Association for the Education of Young Children, strongly support DAP in early childhood education, which is reflected in the NAEYC preschool quality standards and accreditation evaluation criteria.

According to Bredekamp and Copple (1997), the NAEYC describes DAP in terms of three categories of practices:

- Category 1: Knowledge of learning, child development, and age-related human characteristics that permit general predictions within an age range about what activities, materials, interactions, or experiences are safe, healthy, interesting, achievable, and challenging to children.
- Category 2: Knowledge of the strengths, interests, and needs of each individual child that permits adaptation and responsiveness to inevitable individual variation.
- Category 3: Knowledge of the social and cultural contexts in which children live, which ensures that learning experiences are meaningful, relevant, and respectful of the participating children and their families. (p. 11)

In longitudinal studies, programs that teach via DAP have regularly shown more positive outcomes for young children (Baumgartner et al., 2011; Frede & Barnett, 1992; Schweinhart et al., 1993).

NAEYC continues to update and revise its standards and definitions of DAP and program quality. Early controversies emerged over NAEYC's definition of "program quality" when Bredekamp (1987) highlighted three major concerns: (a) inattention to cultural awareness, (b) inattention on how to include and serve children with special needs, and (c) a lack of curriculum-specific content. The first edition of the NAEYC-sponsored *Developmentally*

Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8 (Bredekamp, 1987)–which serves as a current position statement of the NAEYC–was therefore viewed as problematic for programs serving minority children. Likewise, Jipson (1991) suggested that focusing on DAP ignored issues of cultural differences when defining age-appropriate practice. Powell (1994) stated that emphasis on a child-sensitive teaching approach is at odds with the more instructional style of teaching that is preferred by some lower income or ethnic-minority parents.

NAEYC responded to the criticism by revising its criteria and issuing a revised edition of its position statement (NAEYC, 2009a), which gave a broader definition of DAP. For example, the current revised edition (adopted in 2009) addresses issues of culture and diversity by defining DAP as including knowledge of children's social and cultural contexts (NAEYC, 2009a). NAEYC also has endorsed additional texts such as *Anti-Bias Curriculum: Tools for Empowering Young Children* (Derman-Sparks & the ABC Task Force, 1989) and *A World of Difference: Readings on Teaching Young Children in a Diverse Society* (Copple, 2003).

Revisions over the past decade have also reflected NAEYC's work to develop professional training standards and a system for Early Childhood Associate Degree Accreditation. Education standards for preschool teachers have steadily increased. The elevated teacher training and credentialing standards create additional hurdles for preschool centers pursuing accreditation because they must plan hiring and training to bring the staff up to the higher standards. In the past, the percentage of White non-Hispanic early childhood teachers increased as degree requirements and compensation requirements rose, and so higher

standards can seem at odds with the need for a greater cultural diversity among new preschool teachers. Experts suggest that the early childhood education field should increase staff diversity and education (Bracken & Crawford, 2010).

One critique of DAP is that this approach might ignore children with special needs, who require different teaching strategies than those used with non-special-needs children (Atwater, Carta, Schwartz, & McConnell, 1994). The NAEYC responded by stating that everyone must strive to make classrooms appropriate and inclusive of all children. Another criticism is that DAP defines a set of abstract principles, but the NAEYC has failed to describe the specifics of a DAP-based curriculum (Bredekamp, 1987). A final criticism of DAP relates to the difficulties involved in defining a concept that is always changing. The NAEYC accepted this criticism and responded that standards are dynamic and changing in response to new knowledge, and that therefore, the NAEYC reviews and revises its position statements to ensure its currency (NAEYC, 2009a). The current NAEYC standards for DAP are stronger than the original standards due to this ongoing self-evaluation and revision.

Developmentally Appropriate Instruction vs. Teacher-Directed Instruction

Historically, preschool education—from its inception to about the 1980s—has been play based, child directed, and taught via developmentally appropriate techniques. However, this trend, which is beneficial and highly regarded by many child development specialists and teachers, quickly changed to teacher-directed academic preschools after the release of *A Nation at Risk* (Gardner et al., 1983).

A significant amount of research has shown that teaching via developmentally appropriate techniques yields higher academic and socioemotional development (Bodrova &

Leong, 2005; Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2001; Brophy, 1989; Burts, 1991; Busink, 1997; Christian & Bell, 1991; Curry & Johnson, 1990; Eghertson, 1987; Elkind, 1981, 1986, 1987; Fromberg, 2002; Healy, 1990; Hirsh-Pasek, Hyson, & Rescorla, 1990; Hyson, 2003; Jambunathan, Burts, & Pierce, 1999; Katz, 2003; Kostelnik, Soderman, & Whiren, 2004; Nel, 2000; Peth-Pierce, 2000; Reio, Maciolek, & Weiss, 2002). But despite all the research findings, academic preschools where children are taught their basic academics via teacher-directed instruction techniques are still very common. In academic teacher-directed preschool classrooms, children are taught basic skills, such as mathematics and English on a daily basis using teacher-directed instruction. In contrast, developmentally appropriate classrooms tend to be child centered, and child directed. Academic classrooms deliver programmed information is given, but in developmentally appropriate classrooms, children are encouraged to explore and experiment with meaningful and age-appropriate activities and toys according to their individual interests and degrees of readiness. Children whose teachers instruct via developmentally appropriate techniques exhibit significantly fewer stress-related problems compared to children whose teachers rely on developmentally inappropriate strategies (Curry & Johnson, 1990).

One important contrast between the two types of instruction is how academics are used in content as well as method. On this subject, Curry and Johnson (1990) stated the following:

> Children are often pushed in the academic sense but held back intellectually. For example, when drills and sheets are used to teach concepts such as colors, shapes, numbers and letters, children may be successful and recall activities. However, when there is a different situation in which they must use the information, they are often unable to apply what they have learned. (p. 118)

In contrast, when children have a variety of experiences, such as cooking, easel painting, block building, listening to stories, helping to count children or blocks in the class, and sorting blocks of various shapes and colors, they are more likely to transfer their knowledge to new situations (Christian & Bell, 1991). Using meaningful experiences rather than rote memory is one of the main criteria for success in kindergarten. Children's creative-thinking and problem-solving skills are enhanced when they participate in developmentally appropriate preschool activities (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 1990). Developmentally appropriate instruction is particularly effective for teaching mathematics. Kostelnik et al. (2004) stated the following:

> Children in developmentally appropriate classrooms have been found to be more involved in the process of understanding mathematics than have children who are taught mathematics with more didactic methods. The former group displays a better grasp of mathematical concepts and is more adept to generalizing numeric skills across situations. (p. 129)

In contrast, when the chronological age rather than developmental age of children is matched to a task, many children experience undue stress and struggle to succeed. Developmental age should therefore be emphasized over chronological age because each child develops at his or her own pace. It is an undisputable fact that we do not all lose our first tooth, walk, or talk at the same age; therefore, it is equally logical to assume that we do not all reach academic readiness at the same age (Garf, 2006).

Unfortunately, many preschools around the nation are still using teacher-directed techniques. Some teachers and directors seem to truly believe that formal, highly structured teaching is necessary and effective, even for very young children. Elkind (1987) pointed out the risks of what he called the "miseducation" of children when he discussed both short-term and long-term problems associated with exposing young children to formal instruction. The

short- term risks are that the children may show symptoms of stress, fatigue, loss of appetite, and decreased efficiency. The long-term risks are that the children's motivation to learn may be harmed and that lack of early opportunities for modeling and interaction may deprive the children of needed spontaneous learning.

However, our affluent society seems to have caught on to the fact that earlier does not mean better when it comes to education. On March 4, 2012, CBS news reported a special segment on "redshirting" (Safer, 2012). Kindergarten redshirting—the practice of parents holding their children back from kindergarten so they can start school at age six, older, bigger, and more mature than their 5-year-old peers—is on the rise. Some research shows that redshirting will give these youngsters an edge in school, and maybe even in life. As Morley Safer reported, boys are twice as likely as girls to be held back, Whites more than minorities, and the rich redshirt their children more than the poor.

There have also been significant longitudinal studies of children in kindergarten who came from either developmental or teacher-directed academic preschools. All studies found that children who graduated from academic teacher-directed preschools exhibited higher anxiety and fewer prosocial behaviors (Burts,1991; Marcon, 2002; Reio et al., 2002; Weikhart & Schweinhart, 1998). Marcon (2002) stated the following:

> Children whose preschool experience was child initiated fared better than peers in the transition from the primary to the later elementary school grades. Not only were their overall grades following the transition significantly higher, their school performance improved or held constant in all but two subject areas (music, social studies) despite increased academic demands for the next grade level. Grades of children from academically directed preschool classrooms declined in all but one subject area (handwriting) following the 6 year transition. (p. 223)

Noteworthy as well is that a teacher-directed academic preschool would receive low ratings on a number of ECERS–R items as well as NAEYC criteria because this type of program lacks open-ended play materials and overemphasizes the use of abstract paper-and-pencil activities as well as whole-group instruction. The NAEYC strongly advocates the use of developmentally appropriate techniques for teaching children in the preschool and kindergarten years.

To better understand the superiority of the NAEYC standards and accreditation process over other accreditation organizations, it is imperative to briefly compare the NAEYC accreditation standards and process with the rest of the accreditation systems. A brief overview of each of the seven organizations' systems is necessary.

Accreditation Organizations for Early Childhood Centers

As mentioned in Chapter one, besides NAEYC accreditation, seven other accreditation systems exist nationwide. However, not all of these accreditation organizations accredit preschools (e.g., NAFCC). More importantly, some of these organizations do not focus exclusively on preschool level and base their standards and criteria on NAEYC standards. For example, NECPA, which accredits preschools nationwide, has traditionally based its standards on publications from NAEYC. Furthermore, ACSI and COA accredit organizations other than childcare centers.

NECPA and NAC

The National Early Childhood Program Accreditation (NECPA) has been accrediting schools since 1991 and has accredited about 654 sites nationwide. NECPA's steps toward accreditation are somewhat similar to NAEYC's accreditation steps. First, the administrator

from NECPA requests the necessary paperwork (self-study), then each classroom proceeds through the self-study and shares its findings with the director. The teachers and director discuss the areas of noncompliance and work toward meeting the unmet compliances. Finally, a request for verification is sent to NECPA and a mentor is assigned. The mentor visits the site and verifies the program's findings and shortcomings, if any. The mentor then takes his or her notes back to NECPA, where program validators create a program profile. The program profile is sent to the National Accreditation Commission for Early Care and education programs (NAC), where the final formal decision is made. The program can either gain full accreditation for 3 years, be pending for further minor improvements, or be deferred.

The NAC, which makes final decisions on NECPA's accreditation of programs, has been offering accreditation since 1995 and has over 700 accredited schools nationwide. NAC accreditation has a three-step process: the first step is the self-study in which administrators, parents, and staff evaluate the program in accordance with NAC Accreditation Standards by identifying strengths and areas for improvement. The program rates the standards when improvements are made and standards are fully met. Then follows the validation step, in which trained NAC validators conduct onsite observations and verify information provided by the program, parents, and staff surveys. The validator's responsibility is to report to NAC what is observed in the program on the day of the validation visit. The validator will check required documents, interview staff as needed, and meet with the onsite director for an exit interview. Finally, accreditation decisions are made under the guidance of NAC Commissioners. Decisions are based on careful study of the materials submitted by the validator, which includes director

comments obtained during the exit interview. A decision to award, defer, or deny accreditation is made in approximately 12 weeks from the date of the validation visit.

APPLE

The Accredited Professional Preschool Learning Environment (APPLE) has been offering accreditation for early childhood programs since 1997, with over 700 accredited programs nationwide. The APPLE accreditation process begins with an application to request the self-study materials. The self-study is a time for reflection and improvement that requires the development of a portfolio of documentation. The portfolio is submitted to the APPLE program office, indicating readiness for verification. The portfolio is reviewed in the APPLE office and, if found to be in compliance with the APPLE standards, a verifier is assigned.

The verifier visits the program to verify compliance with the accreditation standards. The APPLE Commission has final authority to render the accreditation decision after a thorough review of all documentation. APPLE accreditation is valid for 3 years, with annual renewals required. Upon a renewal of accreditation, the accreditation is valid for 5 years with a possible drop-in accreditation visit in that time frame.

AMS

The American Montessori Society (AMS) has been accrediting schools since 1995 and has over 165 accredited preschools nationwide. Just like the rest of the accreditations, it is a voluntary process that takes 1 to 2 years to complete. Accreditation begins with an intensive self- study, by the school, involving the school's entire community—students, staff, faculty, administration, board members, and parents. During the application process, every aspect of the

school is examined and documented, including governance, curriculum, fiscal and personnel policies, facilities, health and safety practices, teacher preparation, and learner outcomes.

At the end of the self-study period, a thorough onsite peer review is conducted. In addition to determining whether the school meets AMS standards, the review team evaluates the school to see how well it is achieving its own mission and goals—whether the school is what it says it is and does what it says it does.

After identifying both strengths and areas to strengthen, the school commits to a strategic plan for improvement that incorporates the recommendations of its peer review team. All AMS-accredited schools must maintain compliance with school accreditation standards and work toward continuous improvement. Each accredited school submits a yearly report outlining progress toward the objectives in its strategic plan. AMS is the organization that offers the longest accreditation term of 7 years.

ACSI

The Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) began accrediting preschools in 2011 and currently has 147 preschools accredited nationwide. There are a total of five steps toward accreditation. The first step is the application process in which ACSI determines the school's eligibility; the second step is the candidacy status in which the school becomes a candidate to proceed toward accreditation. The third step is the self-study process, which lasts at least 1 year but can take longer. The fourth step is when the team visits and interviews, observes, and documents how well the school has met the standards. Finally, the commission makes their decision.

COA

The Council on Accreditation (COA) is an international, independent, not-for-profitchild- and family-service and behavioral healthcare accrediting organization. It is unique from the rest of the accreditation systems because it accredits organizations other than school systems and is the most expensive one. COA was founded in 1977 by the Child Welfare League of America and Family Service America (now the Alliance for Children and Families). COA currently accredits over 45 different service areas such as substance abuse treatment, adult day care, services for the homeless, foster care, and intercountry adoption.

The first step toward accreditation is submitting the application for accreditation. After approximately 2-4 weeks, COA will send the organization a letter accompanied by a Financial Agreement, which, among other things, contains the (re)accreditation fee. The organization can either pay the accreditation fee in total, or pay 50% at the time of signing the Financial Agreement, with the balance due in 60 days. Then, the *Standards and Self-Study Manual* is sent within 48 hours, and a telephone conference call is scheduled with an intake coordinator within 3-4 weeks, after which the self-study materials are mailed.

The self-study is a written document that the organization completes prior to its site visit. An organization can elect to submit its self-study in two phases: first the administrative sections and then the service sections. If the organization elects to submit the self-study in two parts, its Accreditation Coordinator is able to provide valuable feedback while the self-study is still being completed.

Approximately 10 weeks after the organization submits its self-study, a team of peer reviewers conducts a site visit. This team consists of experienced professionals who have

been trained in COA's process and who, as a team, have the requisite experience to review the organization's services. Prior to the site visit, this team will review the organization's self-study materials and make preliminary decisions regarding implementation. On site, the team will conduct activities intended to verify and clarify the information contained in the self-study. Such activities include, for example, case record review, for which on-site review is essential. During this process, the review team will determine the level of implementation for each standard. The COA reserves the right to defer or deny accreditation on the basis of any single standard if it is a cause of serious concern.

Based on the findings of the review team, COA produces a Pre-Commission Review Report (PCR), which is reviewed by an internal committee. The PCR committee provides the organization recommendations for further evidence, demonstrating implementation of those mandatory, critical, and health and safety standards rated as nonimplemented during the site visit. The PCR is sent to the organization 45 business days following the site visit. Organizations then have 45 days to provide their response to the Accreditation Commission, the COA's decision-making body, for review.

The final decision to accredit an organization or request additional documentation to demonstrate compliance is made by the Accreditation Commission. To assure the integrity of the Commission's decision regarding accreditation, the Commission reviews all material anonymously (i.e., a code is assigned to the organization by COA staff and all information identifying the organization is deleted). The organization receives a Final Accreditation Report (FAR) following the successful completion of the process. This report provides the organization with a complete set of ratings for all applicable standards, a list of the organization's strengths,

and a list of the organization's areas for improvement. This report can be used at the organization's discretion with stakeholders.

The entire accreditation process can be completed in 12 to 14 months. COA accreditation is effective for 4 years from the date of the initial accreditation. All organizations must certify annually between accreditation reviews that they will continue to implement the standards. Organizations can choose a 3-year accreditation cycle if they prefer or are required to by funders or other regulatory agencies. The COA will calculate the accreditation fee using a sliding scale based on the organization's most recent audited gross annual revenue. Fees start at a minimum of $6,720 for a non-sponsor-affiliated organization with revenue of $500,000 or less, and increase accordingly.

NAFCC

The National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC) differs from the rest of the organizations in being the only national accreditation system that accredits family-based childcare. The NAFCC has been accrediting family-based childcare centers since 1998 with over 1,716 accredited childcare homes. Accreditation reflects a high level of quality through a process that examines all aspects of the family childcare program, such as relationships, the environment, developmental learning activities, safety and health, and professional and business practices. Once accredited, family childcare providers agree to abide by the standards set forth and to be measured against those standards, with periodic integrity and compliance reviews.

The first step toward accreditation is the self-study toward becoming accredited. Candidates receive a self-study kit with the tools to guide them through their self-study process. During self-study, providers evaluate themselves and their programs–using the Quality

Standards for NAFCC Accreditation–and make quality improvements. When candidates believe they have reached their professional development goals and have made the necessary quality improvements in their programs, they commit to completing accreditation by submitting an accreditation application. At this time, the NAFCC assesses candidate eligibility. Once the NAFCC verifies eligibility, a NAFCC-trained observer is assigned to visit the program and conduct an observation. The observer gathers information based on the Quality Standards and objectively documents what is seen and heard. The NAFCC reviews documentation from the observer and the candidate, as well as from data in the parent surveys.

The NAFCC Accreditation Commission uses that information to determine the candidate's accreditation status. Annual renewals are required to maintain accreditation during the 3-year accreditation term, and they offer a way for accredited providers to update the NAFCC about their programs during the accreditation period. As part of annual renewals, providers will regularly assess themselves and their programs to ensure continuous compliance with the Quality Standards for NAFCC Accreditation. They will also verify that they continue to meet all eligibility requirements and report their professional development activities and quality improvements they have completed during the year.

All eight accreditation organizations accredit on a voluntary basis, require a self-study process, and in most cases, require a considerable amount of money. Childcare in the United States ranges from home-based childcare systems to private, public, and state or federally funded programs. Requiring all childcare centers to be accredited, whether home based or not, can be challenging for this reason alone. To further understand how childcare systems are funded, further analysis of preschool policies in needed.

Preschool Policy in the United States

In the United States, preschool policy is set at multiple governmental levels, including federal, state, and local levels. Early childhood education programs serving children 1 or 2 years before entry into kindergarten are funded by a combination of federal, state, and local public funds, as well as private funds that come directly from families, employers, foundations, religious groups, and other charitable organizations (Gish, 2002).

At the federal level, Head Start, Title I, Title V, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and Child Care and Development Block Grant programs provide funds for childcare and early childhood education for low-income families. Federal income tax credits also subsidize childcare for qualifying families. In addition, through the 2001 NCLB legislation, the federal government has stressed the importance of funding early childhood education as part of an organized effort to raise student achievement. Congress's reauthorization of TANF in 2006 and Head Start in 2007 included provisions to expand access and enhance quality. These objectives also have been incorporated in the new funding for Head Start, CCDBG, and other early childhood programs in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, and in the federal budget for 2010 (Gish, 2002).

Although these recent developments point to a potentially more active role for the federal government in early childhood policy, initiatives at the state level arguably represent the most active arena of policy development for preschools. Even when federal funding for early childhood programs serving preschool-age children is targeted and available, federal funds are insufficient to reach all eligible children. Therefore, a growing number of states have instituted

policies to expand access to and raise the quality of preschool programs serving 4-year-old children and, in some cases, 3-year-old children (Gish, 2002).

Other initiatives in support of these objectives include designing or modifying models for program delivery, financing, governance, and data collection. One sign of the expanding state involvement in preschool policy is the growth in state funding for preschool programs, from $2.4 billion in the 2001–2002 school year to $3.7 billion in 2006–2007 (Barnett, Hustedt, Hawkinson, & Robin, 2006; Barnett, Robin, Hustedt, & Schulman, 2003). In the 2006–2007 school year, state-funded early childhood programs in 38 states served more than one million children in the United States. In fact, state-funded programs now serve more children than does the federal Head Start program, which reached nearly 720,000 children in the same school year. However, total Head Start grants of $5.9 billion still exceed the states' total financial commitment to early childhood education.

California Preschools

Recently, it has become evident that because California children are falling behind in education performance; as such, policymakers are expressing interest in understanding whether they should expand public funding for California preschool education. In 2002, the federal NCLB Act proclaimed improved student achievement in elementary and secondary schools as a national goal. In 2005, Governor Schwarzenegger prioritized education reform by establishing a Governor's Committee on Education Excellence. Raising student achievement has become one of California policymakers' major goals, with an increased need for identifying achievement shortfalls. In 2007, the RAND Corporation published studies documenting the continuing poor achievement of children in the early grades of California schools (Cannon & Karoly,

2007). Performance on state standardized tests such as the California Standardized Test continues to indicate that shortfalls in achievement, especially for minority students from low-income households, have their early roots in preschool and kindergarten (Karoly, 2009).

Evidence from research shows that, for most children, well-designed preschool programs enhance preschool readiness. For example, when students of diverse races, ethnicities, and family incomes who attended the universal preschool program of Tulsa, Oklahoma, were studied, researchers found that the participants experienced improved readiness for school (Karoly, 2009). The most convincing and positive results were found after careful analysis of the program. Nationwide, similar analyses have revealed that, when considering the effects of preschool on school readiness, the strongest improvements occur among the most disadvantaged students. This fact confirms the high potential of narrowing the gap in school readiness between advantaged and disadvantaged children by exposing disadvantaged children to high-quality preschool programs. It is important to note that high teacher qualifications are almost always present in high-quality preschool programs (Karoly, 2009).

Preschool Teacher Qualifications

At present, there are no universally recognized rules or regulations specifying the minimum education and training required for teachers in early-learning programs. However, studies of child-development program quality have found strong correlations between student achievement and teachers' education and training.

Even though a teacher's level of education alone cannot guarantee positive outcomes, it clearly plays a big role. In some of the most successful national universal early childhood education programs—including the Child-Parent Center program in Chicago, the High/Scope

Perry Preschool Project in Michigan, and Oklahoma's program of universal preschool—all of the lead teachers had earned at least a bachelor's degree (Schweinhart et al., 1993).

The research literature and theories reviewed have shaped educators' understanding of the multiple complex issues surrounding quality preschool education and accreditation, and inspired the proposed study. One concern from the early literature was the unfair portrayal of minority student populations from studies conducted through the lens of deficit theory. As a result of research and changes in public policy, as discussed earlier, the NAEYC and other professional organizations at the federal, state, and local levels advanced new guidelines on DAP. However, to date, despite increased federal and state funding for preschool education, most preschools are not accredited, and many eligible young children do not attend high-quality early education programs.

This literature review suggests that further research is needed to explore how preschool administrators, teaching staff, and parents make decisions about preschool quality improvements and implementing program changes toward NAEYC accreditation. Research is needed to gain better understanding of appropriate local practices and issues that factor into the preschool improvement process. Research will explore reasons that motivate or prevent the pursuit of NAEYC accreditation. This research can illustrate practices for preschool quality improvements as a model to help encourage other centers to follow suit and increase the number of NAEYC-accredited preschools in California and around the nation.

Why NAEYC Accreditation and How it Can Help Increase Quality

NAEYC accreditation provides an evidence-based standard of early childhood program quality. Whereas NAEYC accreditation sets the ceiling for early childhood program quality,

state childcare licensing regulations dictate the minimum level of quality to protect the children in state- licensed centers (McDonald, 2009). Because licensing regulations are basic regulations for programs, and NAEYC accreditation criteria represent a professional consensus on program excellence, a significant difference can exist in specifications for program quality between the two. As early childhood education teacher training and curricula are not standardized or enforced (from state to state and public to private), quality and content vary widely across thousands of public and private early childhood education centers and preschools. Accreditation serves as an important measure of the quality of early childhood programs and preschools, and accreditation agencies often set much higher quality and training standards than the minimum state licensing requirements for early childhood care and education.

States have found that they need additional strategies and public policies along with their regulatory systems to support high-quality services for all families. Therefore, the majority of states require childcare programs to be NAEYC accredited in order to receive higher subsidy reimbursement rates (McDonald, 2009; Sanford-Brown, 2010).

By the mid-1990s, millions of corporate, union, and foundation dollars had been been spent toward helping childcare centers achieve NAEYC accreditation (Bjorklund, 1994; Goldfarb & Flis, 1996; Harris, Morgan & Sprague, 1996; NAEYC, 2011). Public funds are also increasingly being directed toward accredited programs as a way to supplement the minimum standards of licensing to improve and sustain quality. In fact, the majority of states require early care and education programs to be NAEYC accredited in order to receive higher childcare subsidy reimbursements including child care centers on military bases (Sanford-Brown, 2010). In 1989, Congress passed the Military Child Care Act (MCCA) and called for development of a

military child care system would promote the development and well being of military families' children. To raise quality, NAEYC accreditation was promoted through subsidies. Today, the military child care system is regarded as one of the best in the country, with nearly 95% of the centers accredited by NAEYC (Lucas, 2011).

In a study in California childcare centers, researchers found that centers that attained NAEYC accreditation received a higher overall center quality score than other centers (Whitebook, Sakai, & Howes, 1997). The two analyses of childcare centers in the National Child Care Staffing Study and its 4-year follow-up study found that accredited centers had better trained staff, lower staff turnover, provided more developmentally appropriate activities, and had higher quality caregiving than nonaccredited centers (Jorde Bloom, 1996).

In addition, a 2007 study found that NAEYC-accredited programs among a group of California childcare centers had higher levels of program quality and teacher sensitivity (Gerber, Whitebook, & Weinstein, 2007). This finding is not a surprise, because state licensing regulations require only 12 college units and 6 months of experience to work as a preschool teacher, whereas the NAEYC requires a preschool teacher to have at least an AA degree, and by 2015, will require that teachers be working toward a bachelor's degree.

Apple (2006) stated that in contrast to childcare regulations, NAEYC voluntary accreditation for ECE programs provides quality criteria, rather than minimum standards. The vast research involving NAEYC accreditation consistently indicates that accredited programs are of higher quality than nonaccredited programs that serve children from low-income families (Bowman et al., 2001; Cryer, 2003; Helburn, 1995; Helburn & Bergmann, 2002; Lombardi, 2003; Whitebook, 1996; Whitebook, Sakai et al., 2001).

Jason Sachs, Director of the Department of Early Childhood Education of Boston Public Schools was quoted as saying the following:

> The data are clear in the Boston public schools. Students who attend our preschool and kindergarten classrooms that are NAEYC accredited perform significantly better than students who do not attend accredited programs. NAEYC accreditation appears particularly helpful in improving our kindergarten classrooms. (NAEYC, 2011, p. 1)

In 1997, prior to the reinvention of the NAEYC accreditation, the National Center for the Early Childhood Work Force published a study titled *NAEYC Accreditation as a Strategy for Improving Child Care Quality* (Whitebook, Sakai, & Howes, 1997). This was the first large-scale study of NAEYC accreditation to track changes in quality among centers that sought NAEYC accreditation and those that did not. The study examined the extent to which program quality and staff stability in newly accredited centers were influenced by (a) staff compensation, (b) teaching staff and director backgrounds, (c) director and staff turnover, (d) initial level of quality, and (e) the intensity of support that is available to centers as they seek accreditation.

The study concluded that centers that achieve NAEYC accreditation demonstrate higher overall classroom quality at the time of embarking on the self-study process, and show greater improvement in overall quality ratings, staff–child ratios, and teacher sensitivity scores than do centers that participate in self-study, but do not advance to the validation phase. Centers not advancing to the validation stage demonstrate no improvement in classroom quality, staff–child ratios, or staff–child interactions. Furthermore, the findings of this study suggested that NAEYC accreditation provides assurance that a center has successfully improved the quality of the services it offers to children and their families, and that it is likely to exceed the quality of care provided by nonaccredited centers.

In 1993, Bredekamp concluded that there was an accumulating mass of research that accredited centers differed in specific ways from nonaccredited centers. For example, accredited programs paid their teachers more and provided a more comprehensive benefits package. In fact, NAEYC accreditation criteria 10.E.06 states that part-time employees are offered benefits on a prorated basis, and if some or all of the benefits are not available to the part-time employees, a written plan for improving benefits is developed and implemented. A follow-up study also concluded that accredited centers had better trained staff, paid higher wages, had lower staff turnover, and provided more developmentally appropriate activities and higher quality caregiving for children than nonaccredited centers.

The National Institute for Early Education Research recommends lower teacher–student ratios, higher teacher qualifications, higher teacher salaries, and ongoing professional development for teachers to help improve the quality of early childhood education centers (Ackermann & Barnett, 2006); notably, these are all characteristics referenced as criteria in the NAEYC accreditation standards.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Children in most communities lack access to high-quality NAEYC-accredited preschools, which have been demonstrated to enhance school success and children's lives. In fact, typical early childhood programs in the United States range from poor to mediocre in quality (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2007; Rimm-Kaufman & Ponitz, 2009; Winter & Kelley, 2008), and nationwide, there are fewer than 8,000 NAEYC-accredited preschools. Many private and public preschools are not pursuing NAEYC accreditation. Research is needed to explore administrators', teachers', and parents' perceptions of preschool quality; what motivates or discourages the decision to undergo self-study and apply for NAEYC accreditation; and how accreditation changes perceptions about preschool programs. This dissertation research sought to answer those concerns through the following research questions.

Statement of Research Questions

1. What motivates or discourages preschool administrators in terms of pursuing NAEYC accreditation?
2. What changes do administrators, teachers, and parents believe accreditation will bring about at their preschool?
3. How do administrators', teachers', and parents' perceptions and evaluations of the preschool change following NAEYC accreditation?

Methodology

Educational research must be based on sound scientific research methods. Hatch (2007) has noted that qualitative studies and investigations in the field of education have often been

dismissed due to a very limited interpretation of what is considered "scientifically based" research. Hatch emphasized the importance of using qualitative methodology as a tool for investigating early childhood education for generating information critical to the future of the field. Moreover, Creswell (1998) described qualitative research as more advantageous in many ways than quantitative research because qualitative research is often conducted in a natural environment and is interactive, allowing the researcher to probe deeper into questions that would otherwise be ignored or overlooked.

Quantitative methodology today continues to have the most widespread use and is a valid way to evaluate students' and schools' progress and achievements. Lincoln (1995) suggested that qualitative research allows people to ascribe meaning and context to events in order to make sense of them. Other important attributes of qualitative research are its foundation in participants' interactive comments and that its conclusions emerge more fully because it has this interactive nature, instead of being predetermined by closed-ended survey items and response sets (Creswell, 1998).

Due to the limited prior research on why more preschools are not seeking NAEYC accreditation, this study was conducted using a qualitative case study methodology. Case studies are appropriate to provide an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon being studied. In this particular study, it provides the most compatible methodology to offer a "slice of life" (Yin, 2003) at one early childhood center and conduct interviews and focus groups with the preschool community—including the director, site supervisor teachers, and parents of children who were enrolled during the accreditation process at a private, urban preschool center in Los Angeles.

The case study methodology—in this case, focusing on a large, diverse, urban California preschool center—is a way of conducting research that can significantly "contribute to our knowledge of individual, group, organizational, social, political, and related phenomena" (Yin, 2003, p. 1) in ways that quantitative research cannot. Merriam (1998) has stated that case studies look at "real life situations and provide a rich and holistic account of phenomenon" (p. 32). Stake (1995) recommended the case study as a research method because the uniqueness of cases can optimize the learning and inference process without compromising the strength of the conclusions drawn from the study, given the usual restrictions of time and resources. This uniqueness is often lost in broader sampling and quantitative approaches. Due to these advantages, a qualitative case-study methodology was used for this study.

The study utilized interviews and focus groups to explore the factors that motivated or discouraged the director, site supervisor teachers, and parents in their decision process regarding whether to apply for NAEYC accreditation, and how accreditation changed their perceptions about the center and preschool programs. It also included classroom observation and textual analysis of documents.

Methods of Data Collection

Methods of data collection included classroom observation, fieldnotes, textual analysis of accreditation and self-study documents, and interviews and focus groups with the director, site supervisor, teachers, and parents of children about their experiences during and after the preschool NAEYC accreditation process. Interviews were taped and transcribed for subsequent inductive analyses of responses. The interview questions were open ended, related to the research interest, and in a language familiar to the interviewee (Hatch, 2002). The interviews

were audiotaped, which served as actual evidence that contributed to the confirmability requirement of the trustworthiness of this research. Observations were what Patton (1990) has called "overt observations" because the participants knew that observations were being made and who the observer was. During observations, informal conversations that took place between researcher and participants were audiotaped and documented in the fieldnotes.

Description of the Site

The site for this qualitative research study was a private, faith-based preschool center located in the City of Los Angeles. There were 70 families enrolled in the center, with eight teachers and five teacher assistants throughout eight classrooms. There were two site supervisors who report to the executive director who, in turn, reported to the board of governors. Children ranged in age from 6 weeks to 5.5 years old. The demographic of families included 45 middle-class families and 25 working-class families. Ten families were on subsidized care, 15 families were on financial aid, and 10 families received scholarships and reduced tuition using a sliding scale.

Classrooms were cozy, inviting, and captivating, offering myriad opportunities for children to explore and experiment. Every classroom was equipped with age-appropriate toys and centers, such as a science center, block center, art center, library, dramatic play center, and computer center. Outside were two large play areas, including a structure with a climbing wall and slides, a sandbox, tricycles, and an open place for children to run and play. Outside areas were covered by large shades to protect children from the sun.

Description of Participants and Sampling Criteria

According to Hatch (2002), participants are the ultimate gatekeepers, because "they determine whether and to what extent the researcher will have access to the information desired" (p. 51). Therefore, choosing the right participants for this study was of utmost importance. There were a total of 12 participants: the executive director, the site supervisor, five teachers, and five parents. All participants had been at the center for a minimum of 4 years and were present through the NAEYC accreditation process.

Purposeful sampling was used to obtain the participants for this study. This type of sampling is recommended for case studies to allow researchers to select a sample from which they can learn the most (Merriam, 1998, p. 48). The preschool staff participants (program director of preschool, site supervisor, and five teachers) were selected according to the following criteria: (a) willingness to participate in this study, (b) a clear understanding of the NAEYC standards and criteria, and (c) willingness to participate throughout the entire NAEYC accreditation process. The five parent participants were selected based on the following criteria: (a) willingness to participate in this study and (b) willingness to participate throughout the entire NAEYC accreditation process.

Data Collection Procedure

This study was a qualitative case study of one urban preschool center that had recently undergone self-study and achieved NAEYC accreditation. Semistructured, retrospective interviews (see Appendices A, B, and C) were used to interview the preschool director, site supervisor, five members of the teaching staff, and five parents of children at the preschool,

which had recently earned NAEYC accreditation. Two focus groups were convened at the end with some of these participants.

The primary collection of data was in the form of interviews, focus groups, textual analysis of documents, and school and classroom observations. Data collection included note-taking and transcription of recorded interviews and narratives as well as interviews conducted in person and during planned focus groups. Interviews were tape-recorded with the consent of the interviewees. The data-collection procedures complied with approved IRB protocols for protecting participants' rights as research subjects, protecting the privacy of data, standards for storing documents, and reporting findings in group format. All participants remained anonymous, and data were labeled only with identification numbers. Pseudonyms were used when needed for reporting individual narrative responses.

Transcribed interviews were entered into word-processing and spreadsheet programs to facilitate the qualitative analysis of responses. Organized coding of these data tabulated major themes and categories via analysis of the most frequent responses that emerged during interviews and focus groups. Narrative responses were thus analyzed via inductive and categorical theme analyses (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 1994).

Qualitative analysis has been an effective tool in research, and has been effectively utilized in health, education, and cross-cultural research (e.g., O'Donnell, San Doval, Vornfett, & DeJong, 1994). In this study, the researcher conducted interviews and focus groups with the director, site supervisor, teachers, and parents. Appointments were set for visits at the school to conduct document gathering and interviews. Participants received a small gift to encourage

participation, which took approximately 30 minutes to 1.5 hours each. The study also collected data through the use of the qualitative technique of focus groups, to seek rich descriptions of what motivated or discouraged preschool directors to start and finish the accreditation process.

All data from interviews and focus groups were entered into a confidential, private, and secure database. Demographic information such as gender, age, and years of experience was tabulated to report descriptive aspects of the participants. Transcribed responses were first analyzed by identifying keywords, after which patterns were noted. These patterns were further observed for themes. Once the themes were identified, the data were further analyzed via the identification of recurrent themes across the group of parents, teachers, and administration. Analysis included the development of categories, identification of recurrent themes, and comparisons and contrasts made between cases (Creswell, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 2008). An open-coding procedure, using a line-by-line analysis, was applied in order to develop an alphabetized list of categories (Strauss & Corbin, 2008) for the directors', site supervisors', teachers', and parents' transcribed responses.

Data Analysis

Inductive analysis was utilized to analyze data collected from interviews, focus groups, and observations. Unlike deductive analysis, inductive analysis is a process whereby analysis begins with gathering the data and then looking for patterns (Hatch, 2002). Therefore, instead of gathering data to test the hypothesis, in the inductive model, the hypothesis issues from the context of the study. Hatch has (2002) outlined a detailed, nine-step process for analyzing data via inductive analysis:

1. Read the data and identify frames of analysis
2. Create domains based on semantic relationships discovered within frames of analysis.
3. Identify salient domains, assign them a code, and put others aside.
4. Reread data, refining salient domains and keeping a record of where relationships are found in the data.
5. Decide if your domains are supported by the data and search data for examples that do not fit with or run counter to the relationships in your domains.
6. Complete an analysis within domains.
7. Search for themes across domains.
8. Create a master outline expressing relationships within and among domains.
9. Select data excerpts to support the elements of your outline. (p. 162)

Validity and Reliability

Patton (2001 has stated that validity and reliability are two factors that qualitative researchers should be concerned about while designing a study, analyzing results, and judging the quality of the study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argued that sustaining the trustworthiness of a research report depends on the issues, quantitatively discussed as validity and reliability. To establish validity, findings collected from the different methods must draw the same or similar conclusions (Silverman, 2006).

Qualitative research can be described as descriptive and analytic inquiry that is an interactive process between researcher and participants, and "relies on people's words and observable behavior as the primary data" (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 4). Therefore, qualitative research is value laden, and efforts to ensure confidence in the data and findings are imperative.

To establish the trustworthiness and accuracy of this study, the triangulation method was utilized, and to accomplish triangulation in this study, multiple data collection methods (e.g., interviews, observations) were employed to access multiple data collection sources (e.g.,

physical environment and NAEYC accreditation documents) and to raise multiple voices (e.g., teachers, parents, and administrators).

Triangulation of multiple data sources and methods was ensured through several strategies, such as audiotaping of interviews and focus groups, conducting observations of teachers' teaching methods, monitoring how closely NAEYC accreditation standards were followed, taking fieldnotes, and consulting NAEYC accreditation documents. Therefore, triangulation of data was achieved not only from myriad data collection methods, but also from different perspectives and data sources in this study.

To increase the credibility of this study, the researcher employed "prolonged engagement" and "persistent observation" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In terms of observations, there were 15 days of 4-hour observations in the mornings and an additional 15 days of 4-hour observations in the afternoons. Observations took place over the course of 1 month. Persistent observation was especially important for this study because the researcher needed to observe if and how NAEYC accreditation standards were being followed.

As for prolonged engagement, data gathering through interviews, focus groups, observations, and NAEYC document analysis took about 3 months. Observations were conducted over a 1-month span. There were two focus group interviews lasting between 2 and 3 hours each, and 12 individual interviews lasting from 30 minutes to 1.5 hours each. Finally, document analysis took between 20 and 30 hours.

Through prolonged engagement and persistent observation, the researcher gained a better understanding of the phenomena being studied (Ely, Anzul, Friedman, & Gardner, 1991). "The purpose of persistent observation is to identify those characteristics and elements in the

setting that are most relevant to the object being studied and focusing on them in detail" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 304). As prolonged engagement provides scope, persistent observation provides depth to the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

To establish the trustworthiness of interpretations and data analysis in order to achieve credibility for the findings, "peer debriefing" was used along with prolonged engagement and persistent observations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Interpretation of the data was discussed with colleagues as debriefing. Furthermore, the transcripts of the audio from interviews and focus groups were shared with colleagues to contribute to the dependability and credibility of this research.

Finally, through participant checking, the process of seeking feedback from the study participants was achieved. It is a method of checking the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations of the experience of the participant. It is part of the process of establishing credibility (Ely et al., 1991).

Reflexivity, Positionality, and Limitations

Access

Gaining trust and, therefore full access to a research site, was achieved with much difficulty, even though the researcher herself was a director and had contacts with many other directors in the area. The researcher found that many directors were hesitant to express negative views of the accreditation process and refused participation–even strongly–once they found out that their responses would be audiotaped. However, full access was gained at a particular center, and a strong relationship was formed between the researcher and the director of that center.

Positionality and Reflexivity

As the director of a NAEYC-accredited preschool, the researcher has personally experienced the process of NAEYC accreditation. As this qualitative research illuminated responses from participants about the NAEYC accreditation experience and process, it was crucial that the researcher recognize and address her biases. Maxwell (1996) has stated that there is an inherent influence on behalf of the researcher while conducting the study. In addition, Hatch (2002) noted the following: "While it may improve chances for access and ease the sometimes-cumbersome task of building rapport, studying settings with which you are familiar is generally a bad idea" (p. 47). However, through inductive analysis, the participants' voices will emerge as reliable and trustworthy data. The researcher's role as an experienced director who has been through the NAEYC accreditation process helped her coconstruct knowledge with participants rather than serve as a bias.

According to Hatch (2002), reflexivity is the process of self-reflection that a qualitative researcher takes instead of being an objective scientist. As researchers are part of the world they are studying, tracking their influences is imperative (Hatch, 2002). Hatch (2002) stated the following: "In qualitative work, it is understood that the act of studying a social phenomenon influences the enactment of that phenomenon" (p. 10). Therefore, tracking biases through bracketing and monitoring emotional responses allows a researcher to better understand the phenomena being studied. Kleinsasser (2000) argued that the process of reflecting about one's work is just as crucial as the fieldnotes themselves.

Having personally gone through the NAEYC accreditation process, the researcher planned on keeping fieldnotes that would include her comments. Another imperative aspect of her reflexivity was to maintain a researcher journal in which she could reflect on her work and thoughts. Reflexivity is the "process of personally and academically reflecting on lived experiences in ways that reveal deep connections between the writer and his or her subject" (Hatch, 2002, p. 10).

To establish and maintain validity and reliability in this qualitative research, the strategies of bracketing and self-reflexivity were used. Through bracketing, a researcher becomes self-aware and reflects on the research process and on his or her assumptions. For the researcher to become immersed in the experience of the participants, he/she must become aware of his/her own preconceptions, values, and beliefs, while temporarily surrendering his/her perspective in order to enter the participant's world (Bowers, 1988; Hutchinson, 1993). As Swanson-Kaufman and Schonwald (1988) noted, "It is necessary to state clearly our conscious assumptions about that which we are investigating" (p. 99). The purpose of bracketing is to avoid the possibility that the data and the data analysis simply become a reflection of the researcher's preconceived ideas and values (Mariano, 1995). Self-reflexivity (Green & Stinson, 1999) is one method of "policing oneself" that was employed by this researcher through questioning herself during the study to avoid biases.

Limitations

Time and resource constraints, and the need to facilitate the level of rapport and trust needed to conduct in-depth interviews and focus group interactions, suggested that it was

appropriate to limit the sample to one large preschool setting. The project scope involved recruiting an appropriate preschool, gaining permission from the director and the consent of participants, scheduling interviews and document reviews, planning and doing outreach to parents, and conducting all the interviews and focus groups. Future studies building on the themes identified in this study may attempt a broader sample of multiple preschools with follow-up interviews in a longitudinal approach. However, due to the lack of prior data on this topic, conducting a qualitative case study of a single representative preschool was appropriate.

Conclusions

This qualitative study illuminated the factors inhibiting and/or discouraging preschools directors from pursuing accreditation. Encouraging more preschools to apply for and obtain NAEYC accreditation will create significant improvements in access to quality preschool programs across diverse communities. Many schools do not apply or have difficulty achieving the NAEYC standards. Therefore, new approaches are needed to better understand factors that motivate or discourage schools from seeking accreditation and the best ways to implement quality improvements and DAP in preschool teaching. The purpose of this study was to document factors that influenced preschool administrators, teachers, and parents in terms of meeting NAEYC standards and undergoing the lengthy self-study and documentation process leading to NAEYC accreditation. The study undertook a systematic qualitative investigation of themes that helped explain what motivates or discourages preschool administrators' decisions to pursue NAEYC accreditation. Further, the study illuminated director, staff, and parent beliefs and perceptions that shaped implementation of quality programs and their perception of the

results after successfully achieving NAEYC accreditation. This study will inform future efforts to increase the number of preschools implementing DAP as they pursue and achieve NAEYC accreditation. This study illustrates how administrators, teachers, and parents worked to achieve NAEYC standards at one preschool center. These data are relevant to understanding the accreditation process at a local level, illustrating DAP components and competencies that can inform and encourage preschool programs across diverse communities to pursue NAEYC accreditation.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Introduction

Chapter four is organized into five parts: restatement of the study, the research process, summary of findings, thematic presentation of the data, and answers to the research questions. In the restatement of the study, a review is made of the purpose of the study and the research questions that helped guide this study. The section on the research process describes how data were gathered, organized, and analyzed. Finally, themes that emerged from this study are presented and the research questions are answered.

Restatement of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to document the factors that inhibited or influenced the decision by preschool administrators, teachers, and parents to seek NAEYC accreditation and embark on the lengthy self-study and documentation process leading to NAEYC final approval. This study provides insights into the beliefs and perceptions of the administration, teaching staff, and a group of parents at a private, urban preschool in Los Angeles to understand how their views influenced the decision to seek and successfully achieve NAEYC accreditation. By studying the factors that prevent or shape the decision to pursue national accreditation, this research helps illuminate why so few preschools in the United States are NAEYC accredited despite strong evidence of the advantages of national certification. This study documents the process and negotiation among the different stakeholders in this preschool leading to the decision to successfully obtain national accreditation, with the hope that this effort will encourage other nonaccredited centers to pursue NAEYC accreditation.

Research Questions

This study addressed three research questions about directors', teachers', and parents' perceptions of NAEYC accreditation:

1. What motivates or discourages preschool administrators in terms of pursuing NAEYC accreditation?
2. What changes do administrators, teachers, and parents believe accreditation will bring about at their preschool?
3. How do administrators', teachers', and parents' perceptions and evaluations of the preschool change following NAEYC accreditation?

Research Process

Methodology

Due to the limited prior research on why more preschools are not seeking NAEYC accreditation, this study was conducted by using a qualitative case study methodology. This form of research provided the most compatible methodology that offered a "slice of life" (Yin, 2003) at this early childhood center.

The case study methodology, in this case focused on a large, diverse, urban preschool located in Los Angeles, was an important method of research that significantly contributed "to our knowledge of individual, group, organizational, social, political, and related phenomena" (Yin, 2003, p. 1) in ways that quantitative research cannot. Merriam (1998) stated that case studies look at "real life situations and provide a rich and holistic account of phenomenon" (p. 32). Stake (1995) recommended the case study as a research method because the uniqueness of cases can optimize the learning and inference process without compromising the strength of the

conclusions drawn from the study, given the usual restrictions of time and resources. This uniqueness is often lost in broader sampling and quantitative approaches.

The study utilized interviews and focus groups to explore what factors motivated or discouraged the program director, site supervisor, teachers, and parents in their decision process regarding whether to apply for NAEYC accreditation, and how accreditation changed their perceptions about the center and preschool programs. This study also included textual analysis of documents and classroom observation.

Observations

The study begun in June 2012 with observations of the following classrooms: infant, toddler, and two preschool classrooms. Observations were made during a 1-month period with each classroom being observed for 1 week. The first 3 days of the week, the classroom was observed from opening to noon. During the latter part of the week, observation went from noon until the last child left. In total, over 160 hours of observations were completed.

The goal of the observations was to record how closely teachers adhered to NAEYC criteria. For all observations, the questions were derived from the NAEYC criteria. The infant classroom was observed for the following criteria: how closely the infant classroom teachers followed the health and safety standards. For example, did teachers take off their shoes in the infant classroom? Did they ask other adults to take off their shoes in the classroom? Did teachers change children's diapers in a timely fashion, record it, and dispose of it correctly? Did the teachers store breast milk in the refrigerator and record feeding times? Did teachers engage with infants? Were infants placed on their backs to sleep? Did teachers supervise infants by sight at all times?

During observations in the infant classroom, both teachers' practices consistently adhered to NAEYC criteria. Teachers in the infant classroom were regularly observed removing their shoes before walking into the room. Additional visitors and parents who came to drop off or pick up their child were observed taking their shoes off. During the first day of observations, the teachers reminded the researcher of the shoe policy. The teachers appeared to get along well and communication between them, children, and parents was very strong.

Teachers also engaged with infants on a regular basis by keeping eye contact and talking to them. For example, as a teacher would pick up the infant from his or her crib, the teacher would often say things such as "I am picking you up and we are going to change your diaper," or "I am putting you down on the diaper changing table so I can change your diaper." Teachers often made eye contact with infants and spoke in loving and caring tones. When infants cried teachers would respond by saying things such as "I know you are hungry, I will prepare your food now" or "I am sorry, I know you're sleepy, I am going to help you sleep right after I change your diaper."

During feeding times, teachers kept eye contact with the infants and helped burp them immediately after each feeding. Teachers were observed recording feeding times and making sure that milk was not left outside the refrigerator for more than 1 hour. Teachers in the infant classroom explained that they basically talk out loud all day, which helps the infants with their speech development. To the untrained eye, one might think that talking to infants is a bit silly because of their inability to understand. However, for the trained teachers, speaking out loud to infants is second nature and fundamental for their cognitive growth. Additionally, teachers also recorded every time a child's diaper was changed. Every child had one record sheet with the

following areas to be filled out: child's name, child's birth date, feeding time, diaper changing time, as well as a space to record unusual behaviors such as diarrhea or a change in sleep schedule. The observation sheets were placed on the refrigerator and filled out on a daily basis. A carbon copy of this form was provided to the parents at pick-up time. Children stayed in the infant room until they were ready to transition from the infant classroom into the toddler classroom once they were crawling.

The observations in the toddler classroom were aimed at seeing how closely the toddler class teachers followed the NAEYC criteria. Therefore, the questions for the toddler classroom were based on health and academic criteria of NAEYC. For example, did toddlers have opportunities of fine and gross motor development both inside and outside of the classroom? Were the toddlers supervised mainly by sight? Did the toddlers have opportunities to engage in activities that would promote literacy and writing skills? Were the toddlers served snack and given opportunities to demonstrate self-help skills such as washing hands under the guidance and supervision of the teacher?

The teacher in the toddler classroom had 5 years of experience and was working on her master's degree. Her classroom was well organized and almost everything in the classroom was labeled and stored at the children's level. The teacher explained that this is done on purpose to help children become independent and facilitate their engagement with one another and the environment. She noted that she provided at least two activities a day for both inside and outside to help children develop their physical, social/emotional, and cognitive skills. For example, on Monday she set up a balance beam outside for gross development and playdough inside for fine motor development. In the discovery zone, sand, water and measuring cups were set up for

sensory and cognitive development. She explained that she took about half an hour per day to jot notes regarding the activities she planned to set up for the following day. The activities that took place in the classroom reflected what was written in her lesson plans. During pick-up time she gave brief reports to parents about their child's day.

The teacher's role in the classroom was to plan and implement the daily activities as well as observe and assess the children. Her assistant in the classroom helped supervise as well as change diapers and keep up with the NAEYC forms for feeding and diaper changing times. It was also observed that if any of the teachers needed to step outside of the classroom, they notified each other. They were also often seen exchanging information as to who to keep an extra eye on or who needed more help. It seemed that the teacher and the assistant teacher had very good communication with each other, as well as with children and their parents. Children stayed in the toddler classroom until they were potty trained. Once potty trained, they had regular visits in the preschool classroom, after which they were slowly transitioned into the preschool classroom.

The preschool classrooms were also observed for adherence to health and academic standards and therefore, the questions stated below are derived from the NAEYC criteria as well. For example, did preschoolers have uninterrupted playtime with opportunities for dramatic play and fine and gross motor skills? Did preschoolers have opportunities to read and write? Did preschoolers have opportunities to engage in healthy practices such as brushing teeth and washing hands? Additionally, did lesson plans reflect activities from all four child development domains such as social/emotional, physical, and academic? Were the teachers supervising primarily by sight?

There were two teachers in each preschool classroom. One preschool teacher had over 16 years of teaching for that age group and prior experience with NAEYC accreditation. She was aided by her assistant, who helped supervise, maintain NAEYC paperwork, as well as supplement the classroom materials such as pens, paper, and glue as it ran out. The preschool classroom was set up with the different centers such as science, block area, library, computer center, resting area and a writing center. The preschool teacher took her time every morning to set up the classroom. She explained that she set her classroom activities in a purposeful manner, keeping in mind which child was working on which skill. For example, on Tuesday she was providing two activities on fine motor skills because half of her classroom was starting to write letters. She explained that as children manipulated the playdough and took time to put a necklace together with small beads, their fine motor skills were getting stronger.

Preschoolers also had an hour and a half of uninterrupted play every day. The teachers explained that uninterrupted play for at least an hour helps children with different temperaments engage in play. For example, some children were shy and needed more time to join a group or start their own group play. Additionally, children in the preschool age were very independent, as they were observed using the toilet on their own as well as washing their hands and brushing their teeth. The preschool teacher explained that children are ready to move on to the kindergarten classroom once they are ready socially/emotionally, physically, and academically.For example, a child who has an attention span of at least 15 minutes, knows how to play cooperatively with friends in small and large groups, has no problems separating from parents in the morning, recognizes his or her numbers, letters colors, and shapes, and knows how to write their his/her name, was considered ready to move on to kindergarten.

The final classroom to be observed was the second preschool classroom. This particular classroom also had a teacher and an assistant teacher. The set-up of the classroom was almost identical to the previous classroom, with the following centers: discovery zone (otherwise known as the science center), block area, library, computer center, resting area, art area, and listening and writing centers.

Similar to the previous preschool classroom, the teacher was in charge of implementing the lesson plan and assessing the children. The assistant was in charge of supervising children and making sure that NAEYC forms were filled out correctly. Children in this classroom were observed playing as they moved from one center to the next. Children were observed engaging in activities such as science and art. The preschool teacher explained that she sets up on a daily basis with children's needs and interests in mind. She frequently sets up activities that target fine motor development as children are practicing their writing skills. Lesson plans posted on the bulletin board seem to reflect the set-up of the classroom. Lesson plans are posted on a weekly basis with two activities planned for social/emotional, academic, physical, and cognitive levels.

Upon completing the observation of all four classrooms, the researcher embarked on the textual analysis phase. Completing the observations first provided the researcher with written and visual memories to compare with the textual analysis. If questions emerged about whether a criteria was met or not during textual analysis, it was easy able to go back into the classroom to observe and ask questions.

Textual Analysis

Textual analysis took place during the month of July 2012. Approximately 5 hours per day were dedicated to analyzing the documents. The goals of textual analysis were (a) to observe whether NAEYC criteria were used as guidelines for writing policies for the preschool program, and (b) to compare whether these policies (as stated in the staff and parent handbooks) were being followed in the classrooms. (The parent and staff handbooks were created by the school and are available to staff and parents of enrolled children only. They are therefore not included in the reference listings.) This step was undertaken to establish the trustworthiness and accuracy of this study. The following documents were analyzed: parent and staff handbooks, parent and staff surveys, lesson plans, and Department of Social Services (DPSS) licensing history. Parent and staff handbooks were analyzed to see if NAEYC criteria were integrated in policies of both handbooks. For example, were there policies on hand washing and sanitizing? Did the policies of discipline reflect what NAEYC states? Parent and staff surveys were analyzed to assess morale between administration and teachers and school and parents, and to illuminate weaknesses and strengths of the program. Lesson plans were analyzed to see if activities were being planned to help children develop in all four domains of development, such as social, emotional, physical, and academic, as well as to determine whether lesson plans aligned with curriculum goals. Finally, DPSS licensing history was reviewed to see if any serious violations were apparent on the preschool record.

Interviews

The third step of the research process entailed interviewing 12 participants from the preschool. Interviews took place over the months of August and September 2012. The participants included the program director as well as the site supervisor, five teachers, and five parents. Purposeful sampling method was utilized to pick the five parents and five staff. This type of sampling is recommended for case studies to allow researchers to select a sample from which they can learn the most (Merriam, 1998). Participants from Table 2 (program director of the preschool, site supervisor, and five teachers) were selected according to the following criteria: (a) willingness to participate in this study, (b) a clear understanding of the NAEYC standards and criteria, and (c) participation throughout the entire NAEYC accreditation process. Participants from Table 3 (five parents) were selected based on the following criteria: (a) willingness to participate in this study and (b) participation through the entire NAEYC accreditation process. Interview questions were selected carefully to help answer the research questions. Upon completion of the interviews, focus groups were conducted as the third step of this research. Data from focus groups further helped triangulate data between individual interviews, observations, and textual analysis.

Focus Groups

The final component of the research process consisted of two focus groups that took place during the first 2 weeks of September 2012. In comparison to the work involved in conducting individual interviews, gathering data from several participants through the focus groups was quick and convenient. To accomplish triangulation, focus groups were formed to capitalize on the communication between research participants. The method was particularly

useful for exploring participants' knowledge and experiences and helped examine what they thought, how they thought, and why they thought that way. The first focus group included the director, site supervisor, and teachers. The second focus group was with the preschool parents. The focus groups as well as the individual interviews were conducted in the preschool facility. Each interviewee was given the option of being interviewed in an empty classroom, the teachers' lounge, or simply in one of the preschool yards.

The Setting

The site for this qualitative research study was a private faith-based preschool located in the City of Los Angeles. The preschool and church were connected by one common wall. At the time of this study, there were 70 children enrolled in the center, with eight teachers and five teacher assistants throughout eight classrooms. There were two site supervisors, who reported to the program director, who in turn reported to the board of governors. Children ranged in age from 6 weeks to 5.5 years old. The demographic of families included 45 middle-class families and 25 working-class families. Ten families were on subsidized care, 15 families on financial aid, and 10 families received scholarships and reduced tuition using a sliding scale. Subsidized care through the state of California was not available prior to NAEYC accreditation.

Upon approaching the main door of the facility, one could not help but notice how secure the facility was. A camera was on the left side of the door, clearly visible to any person attempting to enter the building. The main door was operated by a buzzing machine. Once guests pushed the buzzer, someone from the main office answered by asking how they could be of help. Once the guest identified him- or herself, the personnel from the main office opened the

door and directed the guest to the main office. Current parents and staff members entered the building through a four-digit security code assigned to them at the beginning of each year.

The first floor of the facility housed the infants and toddlers. As guests walked through the long hallway, the cheerful laughter of the toddlers, music, and some cries of infants filled the hallway. Each door on the first floor had a small window where guests or parents could easily peek through and have a full view of the classroom. Next to each classroom door were bulletin boards divided into two sections. One section contained pictures of current children and their favorite colors, toys, and food. The second section had a welcoming note from the classroom teacher(s), with his or her picture as well as a short biography.

The second floor had a somewhat similar setting, except that it was much louder and more action packed, as it housed two preschool classrooms. Walking down the hallway, one could hear singing, playing, reciting, and negotiating, and teachers redirecting or simply engaged in conversations. The second floor had a main bathroom and therefore children could be seen going in and out of the classrooms as they used the restroom. In addition to the preschoolers, the second floor also had a teachers' lounge, a resource room, and the program director's office. The teachers' lounge was a rather simple room with a table, couch, and microwave.

The preschool also had two different yards. One was for the younger children, and the second is for the older children. The two play yards were similar in set-up. Both had a colorful play structure that allowed children to go down on two spiral slides, and plenty of space to climb. The play structures were covered with two canopies for protection against the sun. Both

yards had a sandbox that measured 10 feet by 20 feet. Other toys in the yards included large-size blocks, tricycles, and basketball hoops with basketballs.

The overall setting of the preschool exuded an ambiance of calmness, joy, comfort, and excitement. Many parents stated throughout their interviews that the preschool felt like an extension of their homes. This kind of environment was conducive to learning as well being as a comfortable place to conduct the interviews.

Participant Demographics

A total of 12 participants were chosen for this study. The 12 participants included five parents, five teachers, one site supervisor, and the program director. All participant names in this dissertation are fictitious pseudonyms, to protect the privacy of the study participants. Table 2 shows director and teacher participant data.

Table 2

Participant Data: Director, Site Supervisor, and Teachers

Participant	Age	Gender	Teacher qualifications	Years of experience	Years worked at center
Program Director	33	F	M.A.	16	4
Site Supervisor	34	F	M.A./M.A.	18	5
Teacher Bessy	35	F	AA	12	7
Teacher Christine	29	F	B.A.	5	5
Teacher Dania	62	F	AA	28	28
Teacher Heidi	40	F	AA	16	8
Teacher Lupe	38	F	B.A.	20	4

Director, Site Supervisor, and Teachers

Program director. The program director of the preschool was an articulate and outspoken individual who almost always had a smile. As one starts a conversation with her, it becomes clear that she had excellent communication skills as well as a rich knowledge in the field of early childhood education. She had over 16 years of experience as a director and spoke with passion and a genuine interest for the field. The director of the preschool kept an open-door policy, which was evident as her staff and parents popped in and out of her office all day long. Occasionally, even children were seen saying "Hello Ms. Lily, I miss you" as they walked by. The director had two site supervisors who assisted her with her administrative duties.

Site supervisor. The site supervisor had two master's degrees, one in the field of education and the other in psychology. She had worked in the field of education for the past 18 years, with 5 of the years at the center. Although she enjoyed her administrative duties, she noted that her real passion was working with children and their families. Her daily duties included making sure that teachers were filling out the daily forms required for licensing and accreditation, inspecting the entire school for cleanliness and safety, and providing any necessary coverage for lunch breaks and general support for all the teachers.

Teacher Bessy. Bessy had been in the field for 12 years and held an associate of arts (A.A) degree in child development. She was a single mother of two toddlers and enjoyed her job very much. She taught in the infant classrooms. Her classroom was well organized and very clean. She took pride in being a good organizer and loved to keep her classroom clean. Once her toddlers enter elementary school, she planned to pursue a bachelor's degree. She was one of the teachers who had to return to school to pursue a degree.

Teacher Christine. Christine had a bachelor's degree in child development and was enrolled in a master's program. She taught in the toddler classroom. Her class was organized into five different sections: the art center, discovery zone, block center, quiet center, and dramatic play. She took pride in continuing her education and offered up-to-date research-based teaching techniques.

Teacher Dania. Dania was the veteran of the preschool with the most experience out of all the teachers. She had over 28 years of experience, all of which had been at the study site. She had recently earned her AA degree in child development. Although she was initially not happy that she had to pursue a degree at her age and with so much experience under her belt, she was very happy to have her AA degree. She was the proud teacher of the preschool-age children, and her classroom was organized into eight different centers: an art corner, computer center, reading corner, library, quiet resting area, writing center, and block and science centers.

Teacher Heidi. Heidi also held an AA degree in the field of child development and taught a preschool classroom as well. She had over 16 years of teaching experience and was considering continuing her education. Her previous employment site had been accredited through NAEYC. Because of her familiarity with NAEYC, she was one of the teachers who helped guide the rest of the teachers with their classroom portfolios. She took pride in working in a nationally accredited preschool. Her classroom was very organized and displayed more print than any other classroom in the school.

Teacher Lupe. Lupe held a bachelor's degree in elementary education and was enrolled in a program to complete a single-subject credential. Although she loved working in the preschool, she planned on working for LAUSD in hopes of earning more money. She also felt

pressure from the parents to make sure their children were ready for first grade. She met with the parents formally twice a year to talk about their children's growth and first-grade readiness.

Parents

The five parents who were chosen to participate in this study came with different career backgrounds and were enthusiastic about participating in this study. They were very proud of the preschool and showed no hesitation in expressing their contentment. Table 3 displays their demographics, which are further expanded in the following section with short summaries of their backgrounds.

Table 3

Participant Data: Parents

Participant	Age	Gender	Years at school	No. of children	Occupation
Parent Marta	28	F	3	1	Paralegal
Parent Kimberly	32	F	3	1	Accountant
Parent Mary	42	F	5	2	Housewife
Parent Anne	39	F	3	2	Attorney
Parent Amanda	27	F	3	1	Secretary

Parent Marta. At first, Marta seemed a little shy, but after a few moments, she became quite talkative and energetic. She had been at the school for 3 years and her child was currently in the kindergarten classroom. She was married to her second husband and worked part time as a paralegal in her husband's firm. She chose the preschool based on its being a very secure facility, and that her child seemed to be very happy from the first visit. She was sad to eventually have to leave the school but hoped to come back with her future second child. Marta also stated how she loved the preschool director and all the preschool teachers. From the beginning, the director made her feel comfortable and the teachers showed much love and

affection to her child. She remembered how her child had a hard time leaving the preschool on the first day they visited.

Parent Kimberly. Kimberly has one child enrolled in the preschool classroom. She was a single mother, worked long hours as an accountant in a large firm, and was enrolled in a part-time MBA program. She was very outspoken, energetic, and supportive of the director as well as of her child's teacher. She stated that the director had made her feel comfortable from the first interaction on the phone. During her visit, she knew right away that the school was the right fit for her daughter. She loved t that the entrance was highly secured and that the preschool director had an open-door policy. She noticed during the tour how teachers were affectionate and attentive with the children. Kimberly lived within walking distance of the school.

Parent Mary. Mary had been at the school the longest and had two children enrolled. She was a stay-at-home mom of a set of twins who were in preschool. They originally started in the toddler classroom and moved up to preschool. She felt an immediate connection with the preschool director as well as with the toddler teacher during her first tour of the school. She said she remembered going home and telling her husband that she found the preschool of her dreams. She loved the preschool because it was one of the safest preschools she had visited, but also because the school implemented a play-based philosophy. She was an elementary school teacher, and thus familiar with accreditation and how young children learn. As an educator herself, she believed in the importance of NAEYC accreditation and a play-based philosophy.

Parent Anne. Anne was an attorney but had not been practicing for over 3 years. She decided to be a stay-at-home mom and take care of her two children. She was planning on going back to work when her eldest graduates preschool the following year. She was very

outspoken and energetic. She spoke very highly of the preschool director and her daughters' teachers. She felt that the preschool was an extension of her house and loved how academics were introduced through play. Anne stated that the number one reason she chose the preschool was that there was a buzzer in the main door and not just anyone could walk in. This parent loved that the preschool was accredited because she thought it deserved to be recognized as a model preschool.

Parent Amanda. Amanda was one of the youngest parents. She was shy and soft spoken yet very articulate. She worked as a part-time secretary at her father's business, located three blocks from the preschool. She chose the preschool because it was close to her employment and also was a secure facility. She mentioned several times how happy her son was in the preschool and that he often cried when she came to pick him up because he was not ready to go home. This parent was also very happy with her son's teachers and felt they both brought out the best in him.

How Data Were Analyzed

The first step for analyzing the inductive data was to condense broad and varied data into a brief summary. The second step was to establish clear links between the research questions and the summary findings. The final step was to develop a theory about the underlying structure of experiences.

Interviews were conducted over the months of August and September 2012. All interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriber. Each interview was read and reread. Interviews were coded by hand with key words. The key words were later grouped as patterns. Upon further reading and rereading of the patterns, five major themes were recognized. These

five themes were further organized by subthemes. The analysis of the interviews took place from November 2012 through January, 2013.

How Data Were Organized and Reduced

Upon coding each interview with key words, patterns were observed and highlighted within each participant's transcribed document using the key words. These patterns were further organized into themes. Some themes that emerged were further divided into subcategories. The themes were organized in the following order: (a) beliefs about early childhood development, (b) factors that convinced parents to enroll their children in preschool, (c) feelings about NAEYC accreditation from all participants, (d) changes that NAEYC accreditation brought to their school, and (e) feedback from administration and teachers for NAEYC.

Challenges in Data Collection and Data Analysis

As most of the participants and the researcher held full-time jobs, the challenge was to accommodate both parties to meet for the interviews as well as for everyone to come together for the focus groups. Moreover, it was difficult to find parents who were involved in the accreditation process. Parents supported the idea of the preschool becoming NAEYC accredited, but due to heavy workloads, many chose not to get involved beyond the simple task of completing the family survey, which was not mandatory in itself.

Furthermore, teachers and administration worked on tight schedules with half-hour breaks. After work, teachers wanted to rush home to tend to their own families and personal obligations. With a lot of collaboration, compromise, scheduling, and rescheduling, times were established where both parties came together.

Some teachers also expressed concern about saying anything negative about NAEYC in fear of losing accreditation. Teachers wanted to be reassured that what they said was not going to somehow jeopardize their school's accreditation and that their interviews were going to be kept confidential. Some teachers started the interview with anxiety and nervousness, but as the interviews unfolded, the tension in their bodies and voices began to dissipate noticeably.

Personal and Professional Transformation and Reflection

As a current preschool director who had gone through the NAEYC process, the researcher found it pleasant to connect with fellow colleagues and share thoughts about the NAEYC accreditation process. It was validating to connect with those who had really walked the same path and could provide constructive feedback about the overall NAEYC accreditation process, its benefits and shortcomings. It was also eye-opening to hear feedback from every parent as they expressed how important the issue of safety was for them as well as the happiness of their child.

Summary of Findings

Early Childhood Education is Fundamental for Social/Emotional and Academic Readiness for Entry into Kindergarten

It was clear in individual interviews as well as the focus groups that administrators, teachers, and parents agreed unanimously that preschool experience was crucial for children to develop their social/emotional and academic skills. Although administration, teachers, and staff agreed that the best curriculum to meet the children's needs was a play-based curriculum, administration and staff felt pressured by parents to make sure their children were academically ready for kindergarten.

Safety, Convenience, and Happiness of the Child Determine Parental Choices about Preschools Rather than Accreditation

Ultimately, parents chose to enroll their children in the preschool based on the happiness of their child, preparation for kindergarten readiness, security and safety of the facility, affordability, and location of the preschool. Parents made it very clear both through individual interviews as well as the focus group that NAEYC accreditation alone was not enough for to compel them to enroll their children in preschool. When asked if a lack of NAEYC accreditation would mean automatic disqualification from looking into a preschool, a parent replied, "Um, its important. I don't know that it's a deal breaker" (Parent Michelle).

Ambivalent Feelings by Preschool Administrators, Teachers, and Parents about the Need to Become Accredited

Preschool administrators have a lot to contemplate before deciding to pursue NAEYC accreditation. Major challenges to moving forward with NAEYC accreditation include financial and time constraints, but most important of all, having the knowledge and the right communication skills to convince stakeholders about the importance and benefits of NAEYC accreditation.

Accreditation Brought Stricter Policies on Health Regulations, Qualified Teachers, Curriculum, Assessment, and Diversity

Teachers stated in their individual interviews as well as during the focus group that "Very, very hard work until midnight" (Site Supervisor) paid off once the preschool had received NAEYC accreditation because they felt validated and commended. Also, because

going through the accreditation process involves teamwork, cooperation, and collaboration among all staff, a strong bond among staff members had developed.

Further improvements due to NAEYC accreditation included implementing stricter policies on health regulations—as evidenced in director and teacher interviews, parent and staff handbooks, and the program portfolio. This improvement meant documenting injuries and attaining consent from physicians before administering any medication to children.

Upon achieving NAEYC accreditation, the NAEYC academy sent the school a report of its scores on the 10 different standards and recommendations, which helped elucidate weaknesses in the program (e.g., the lack of unified curriculum and assessment methods for children). Under Areas of Improvement, NAEYC recommended that curriculum be supplemented in the areas of mathematics, science, creative expression, appreciation of arts, health and safety, diversity, and social studies.

Feedback From Administration and Teachers for NAEYC

Both administration and teachers agreed that the NAEYC accreditation process was lengthy, stressful, and time consuming; however, they also agreed that all their hard work was worth it and that they would recommend NAEYC accreditation to other schools. This response emerged in individual interviews as well as at the focus group. Administration and teachers also stated that NAEYC could do a better job of reducing the redundancy of criteria in both classroom and program portfolios.

On the administration level, the program director felt that NAEYC could do a better job to help program directors achieve NAEYC accreditation. The director suggested a mentoring program in which a program director interested in pursuing NAEYC accreditation

could be paired with another program director who had already gone through the process. The program director had also noticed that NAEYC accreditation standards and criteria could contain vocabulary and concepts that the average credentialed preschool teacher might not understand.

The program director strongly felt that the amount of money needed to secure NAEYC accreditation was a major deterrent for preschools to pursue NAEYC accreditation. Additionally, she felt that NAEYC had to do more on their behalf to make sure that financial constraints were not keeping program directors from pursuing NAEYC accreditation. Finally, the program director felt that once NAEYC accreditation was achieved, it was completely left to the program director's discretion to make sure that NAEYC accreditation standards and criteria were being followed and maintained.

Thematic Presentation of Data

A total of five themes emerged from this study, which were further triangulated with textual analysis, observations, and focus groups. The five themes are as follows:

1. Administrators, teachers, and parents felt strongly that early childhood education was crucial to a child's readiness for entry into kindergarten;
2. Safety, convenience, and happiness of the child determined parental choices about preschool rather than accreditation;
3. Teachers, administrators, and parents had ambivalent feelings about the need to become accredited;

4. Accreditation brought stricter policies on health regulations, qualified teachers, unified curriculum, a formal assessment for children, and diversity; and

5. Feedback from administration and teachers for NAEYC.

Theme 1: Early Childhood Education Is Fundamental for Social/Emotional and Academic Readiness for Entry into Kindergarten

Administration, teachers, and parents strongly felt that the preschool years were crucial for children to develop their social/emotional and academic readiness. The program director stated:

> I believe children learn through play and giving lots of opportunities to explore and discover different types of environments, their own open-ended activities, then can ask questions, you know abstract questions. They can start to develop a sense of how things work, so I feel like that's how children learn, I really believe that. They need lots of open-ended opportunities to play, explore, discover, and learn. (Program Director)

The program director had noted that recently in California there had been a lot of pressure placed on academic readiness, creating competition among elementary schools. In return, teachers and administration had been feeling pressure from parents themselves to ensure that their children were academically ready to enter kindergarten. The program director stated:

> Well, I think now, especially in California, we really do focus on children's level of competence, on academic level, when they leave preschool and matriculate elementary, so they're not ready academically, and they don't know, you know, their ABC's, 1,2,3's, how to write their names. There is so much competition now. (Program Director)

Although the program director did not agree with the push on academics and competition to get into private schools, she felt she had no choice but to give in to the system. This is the only way that her preschoolers will be ready for entry into kindergarten when applying to the strongly academic-driven schools (also known as college preparatory schools).

At the time of this study, the preschool teachers were supplementing the preprinted curriculum with additional academic-based lessons to make sure that the children were ready for entry into kindergarten. For example, the preschool teachers used extra worksheets to help children with their fine motor skills.

Teachers agreed with the preschool director that the preschool experience is crucial for developing social/emotional and academic readiness. This opinion was clearly evident throughout their individual interviews as well as in the focus group. Teachers felt that the curriculum must incorporate not only academics but also a social/emotional component. Preschool teachers stressed the importance of learning through hands-on activities, interaction with one another, and materials in the classroom. One teacher stated, "You have to see it, you have to touch it, and you have to feel it, you have to do all the senses in order to really get it and even now for me at age 62, and I still feel like I need to do all that myself, and really get it" (Teacher Debbie).

When asked how preschool is important for a child's development in the areas of social/emotional development and academics, the parents unanimously agreed both individually as well as in the focus group that it was very important. One parent stated, "I think it's absolutely, not even just a luxury, I think it's a necessity" (Parent Kim). This parent went on to say that she had been very frightened to let her son go, but it was the best thing they ever did because "there is no way we could offer him all of those experiences he gets in all of those areas" (Parent Kim).

Parents understood that their children needed the experiences from preschool to be ready for kindergarten. They noticed differences in their children's speech as well as a rise in

their academic skills. One parent stated that she realized that after 2 short months of preschool, her son was able to recognize all the letters of the alphabet. Another parent noted that her child played better in parks, whereas before she had a hard time integrating in groups of children.

Parents favor a play-based curriculum. In individual interviews and the focus group, themes emerged in which parents agreed that children at this age learn best from a play-based curriculum. They agreed that, during the preschool ages, children should be socializing and learning their basic academic skills through play. This attitude was apparent not only in individual interviews but also through the focus group. Parents were clearly not interested in a curriculum that emphasized academics only. One parent stated:

> I think it's very important to a child's development, because it allows them an opportunity to develop social skills, which I think are important. If your child is not interacting daily with other students, when they enter kindergarten, they are not going to be prepared socially, as well as academically, especially in SouthernCalifornia. (Parent Michelle)

Another parent expressed that was important for her child to learn the basic academic skills through play, stating, "Having academic opportunities for the kids to learn through games, through written work, through, you know, circle time, a structured environment. I think allowing them to develop those skills and discipline in the classroom environment, but still be kids and still play" (Parent Renee).

As interviews progressed from one parent to the next, it became clear that parents wanted their children in play-based programs but had a hard time expressing the reasons behind their thinking. One parent explained that she had walked into a preschool classroom during a tour and witnessed toddlers in diapers tracing letters. Although she could not really articulate why this scene felt wrong to her, she knew it was wrong. Another parent felt that her child only

had a short period of time to enjoy her childhood, and she did not want her child stressed with homework. She later added that she never attended preschool yet she did just fine herself. Parents also added that it was important for their children to gain a love of learning and not get stressed and worn out at a young age.

Parents in general expressed strong agreement that children should be taught via play and be ready to enter kindergarten. One parent said that she knew her child was having fun and her teacher said that her child was learning, but she couldn't imagine how, by the end of the year, her child would be ready for kindergarten. The parent stated that she trusted the teacher in the classroom and hoped that her child would be ready. She had also spoken to the director, who helped reassure her that her daughter would, indeed, be ready for kindergarten. The parent stated that the director explained how their teaching methods would help children become ready for kindergarten and supplemented her explanation with research-based articles.

During interviews and observations, it was apparent that parents had good relationships with their children's teachers as well as with the preschool director. As many parents stated, there was a "feeling of home" in the preschool, which visitors can sense as well. This strong bond among the three groups made the perfect environment in which children could thrive. The sense of trust and communication was undeniable. During interviews and observation, it was easy to see that teachers, parents, and the preschool director spoke in friendly voices. They were often seen laughing and joking around. Regular conversation about attending each other's social events were also observed. However, amidst the friendly and collaborative ambiance in the preschool, the teachers and the program

director still felt the pressure of making sure that the preschool children would be ready for kindergarten.

Parents pressure administration and teachers to have their children academically ready for kindergarten. Themes from individual interviews and the focus group revealed that although parents themselves did not feel they pressured teachers to make sure their children were academically ready, the teachers and program director clearly felt pressured by parents about having children academically ready for kindergarten. The program director stated that there was a lot of pressure on academics in the state of California and that, although parents preferred a play-based curriculum, they still expected children to know their basics. The program director explained:

> Well, I think now, especially in California, we really focus on children's level of, I would say, competence on an academic level when they leave preschool and matriculate intoelementary, so they are not ready academically and they don't know, you know, their ABC's, 1,2,3's, how to write their names. There is so much competition now. If they don't know that, then the parents don't feel comfortable with that. (Program Director)

The program director mentioned that during tours she heard and clearly sensed panic in parents' voices regarding kindergarten readiness. Although parents did not express concern directly, the questions directed at her made it clear. For example, the program director explained that during tours, almost every parent asked about the curriculum the school implements and how this curriculum helps children prepare for entry into some of the rigorous college preparatory elementary schools. Furthermore, parents came to tours asking specific questions about how far their children would be taught to count and at what level their children would be reading. The program director noted that parents were more concerned about how much their children would be learning rather than how they would be learning. Furthermore, she noticed

that increasing numbers of parents did not have realistic and age-appropriate expectations for their children; teachers shared similar observations.

It was clear through both individual and focus group interviews that teachers often heard from parents that their children were already reading or needed to start learning how to read. Teachers often felt that children were too young to be exposed to certain academic skills, but the parents insisted. One teacher explained, "Sometimes parents can overestimate what the child's ability is. Not that they might not be able to do it, just to make sure that developmentally it's the right stage" (Site Supervisor). The site supervisor and some teachers felt that besides educating children, they needed to educate their parents about realistic expectations and the difference between developmental stage versus chronological age. The preschool teachers often explained to parents that a child's developmental stage did not always go hand-in-hand with chronological age. Although parents did expect their children to be academically ready for kindergarten, other factors such as the safety of the facility and the happiness of their children were also important.

Academic and social/emotional readiness for kindergarten was important for the parents. They wanted to make sure that their children would be ready for entry into kindergarten. This feeling was evident in individual interviews and in the focus group. Parents observed that private schools in Los Angeles had become very competitive and that kindergarten was the new first grade. Therefore, it was important that their children were prepared adequately for kindergarten.

One parent mentioned that she went through the kindergarten entrance process at a private school with her first child and was shocked at how rigorous and serious the process was. The private college preparatory elementary school she applied to had a formal process in which

the parents and child had to be interviewed separately. Additionally, three recommendation letters were needed along with preschool report cards. The academic requirement for the preschooler was based on the child being able to count up to 100, write her entire name, and know the alphabet by upper- and lowercase letters. Other parents in the group were familiar with this process and were unhappy about it. When asked how important it was that their child was prepared for kindergarten entry, one parent replied:

> I think it's very important to a child's development because it allows them an opportunity to develop social skills, which I think are important. If your child is not interacting daily with other students, when they enter kindergarten, they are not going to be prepared social or academically in Southern California, in Los Angeles especially. So many of the children to go private schools where I feel as though kindergarten is the new first grade. So if they don't have the preschool experience socially, academically they would not be prepared for kindergarten. So I think it's highly important to develop the social skills and the academic skill, the foundation that they need to go on to kindergarten, since it's really kind of first grade now. (Parent Michelle)

Parents in the research group had visited many preschools before deciding to enroll at this school. One parent had visited over eight schools and ruled out preschools for various reasons. This particular parent had visited a preschool where children merely played all day and there was no type of curriculum or structure. Teachers did not even write lesson plans and children's growth was not tracked. Although the parent sensed that children were happy and the facility was fairly secure, she felt uncomfortable sending her child to the school because she felt the school would not adequately prepare her child for kindergarten. As mentioned in Theme 2, accreditation alone did not automatically convince parents to enroll their children in preschool, which means that parents had visited preschools that were not accredited yet sufficed in terms of other factors such as affordability, location, and overall feeling about the preschool. This is one reason that parents and other stakeholders had varied feelings about pursuing accreditation.

Theme 2: Safety, Convenience, and Happiness of the Child Determine Parental Choices about Preschools Rather than Accreditation

Although it was important for some parents, accreditation was not the sole deciding factor for enrolling in a program. Parents explained that they wanted their children to be happy. During interviews, parent faces glowed and some held back tears as they described how happy they were if their children were happy. When asked how they would determine whether their child was happy or not, parents based their answers mostly on experiences during drop-off and pick-up times.

One parent mentioned that her toddler had been enrolled in a different preschool and had cried for months during drop-off time almost every day. Additionally, this child was very eager to leave upon the parent's arrival. Parents had questioned the director and teacher about the child's behavior but were constantly reassured that the child's behavior was normal. The parent mentioned that after 4 months of crying every morning, she decided to pull her child out based on her gut feeling. A few weeks later she toured this preschool and was offered a spot right away. The difference between the schools was astounding, as the child no longer cried at drop-off time and instead gave her a hard time at pick-up time because he did not want to leave. The parent said, "I wanted him to feel loved and appreciated, and just really encouraged" (Parent Renee). Another parent added, "I liked the teachers, and I thought I could see the teachers were really showing attention and affection to the children. And so I wanted my son to be safe and I wanted him to feel that he was cared for and loved" (Parent Kim). One parent noted, "Well, I mean, the basics has to be that it's safe and it's clean, that, you know, it's somewhere I do not

worry leaving my child. I felt that the most important thing was that my son felt loved and accepted" (Parent Renee).

Another parent added that her preschooler was very excited and eager to go to preschool every day, including weekends. She mentioned that the child would often request to be taken to school on the weekend and had a hard time understanding why she could not go to preschool on Saturdays and Sundays. The parent noticed that her daughter's overall mood was good after picking her up from school. Additionally, the child often had conversations with her mother about all the exciting things that happened at school. The last parent to speak during the focus group concluded by stating, "As a parent, that's what you want, you want your kid to be happy and safe, that's what it all comes down to, happiness and safety of your child" (Parent Michelle).

Safety and security of facilities. Enrolling children in preschool is not easy for any parent. Children are their most valuable and most precious asset and leaving them in the care of other people is a decision not to be taken lightly. Every parent whi was interviewed individually stated that the safety and security of his or her child was of the utmost importance and superseded every other criteria for enrollment in preschool. This notion was also unanimously agreed upon during the focus group. The facility was, indeed, a very secure building, as one had to be buzzed in before entering the building. The parent handbook stated:

> We strive to maintain a safe environment for your child(ren). Only parents or guardians are allowed to know and use the code. Please do not allow your child to know the code, or open the door with the code. If a relative or friend will be picking up your child, they may use the intercom. A new code is given out at the beginning of each school year in the fall. Please do not let people in who do not know the code.

Parents had visited preschools where they were able to walk straight into preschool without any buzzers or any personnel noticing their presence, which alone had disqualified the preschool and no further attempts were made from parents to get to know the schools any better. Parents needed to know that their children were being dropped off in a place where they would be safe and secure. One parent stated, "Um well, it has to, the basics has to be that it's safe, that um, it's clean, that you know, somewhere I don't worry leaving my child" (Parent Renee). Another parent said, "It's very affordable I feel, for what you are getting and I feel this was a very safe place where I could feel comfortable leaving my son in more capable hands. I think it's safe, I think they have really good security measures they have taken" (Parent Kim). Another parent stated, "If the school does provide a loving, safe, nurturing environment, where my daughter feels comfortable, where she feels safe, where her self-esteem is high, those kinds of things, I would, those would supersede, you know, a credential or accreditation" (Parent Michelle).

It was also unanimously agreed upon, both in individual groups as well as at the focus group, that NAEYC accreditation did not automatically guarantee a preschool would be a safe and secure place. One parent shared an incident in which her toddler had been left unattended: "You know we just realized well, accreditation doesn't really matter, it's about the people. They actually lost their accreditation" (Parent Deborah). According to this parent, one day they decided to pick up their child early from school. Once they arrived at the school, they proceeded to the classroom and walked in on their toddler sitting on a high chair unsupervised, alone in the classroom. The teachers and the rest of the 11 children were playing outside in the yard. When confronted, the teachers felt awful and apologized profusely for forgetting their child inside the classroom. These parents also had a conversation with the director and pulled

their child out of preschool that same day. They also proceeded to call NAEYC and report this incident. According to the parents, NAEYC explained that this was a clear violation of supervision and that they would look into it. A few weeks later, the parents got a call from NAEYC stating that the preschool's accreditation had been revoked.

It was clear that the safety and security of the facility did not refer only to the building being secure from the public. Supervision of the children was equally important to the safety of the child. Classroom observations revealed that teachers consistently supervised children at all times and adhered to the teacher-to-student ratio as mentioned in their staff handbook. Through textual analysis, it was evident that the parents and staff handbooks asserted clear policies on the importance of supervision. The parent handbook stated:

> Children at [this research site] are supervised by fully qualified preschool teachers with first-aid and CPR as well as a clear background check through FBI, DOJ, and Child Abuse Index Records. Children are never left alone and are supervised at all times by fully-qualified teaching staff at [this research site]. Children are supervised when playing and exploring in discovery learning centers in the classroom as well as outside in the playgrounds. We make sure children have sight and sound supervision at all times but there are exceptions to this when children are toileting and are 4-6 years old or they are building tents. Teachers position themselves to hear and intervene if children need assistance.

During interviews, many parents also expressed that they were very comfortable with how teachers supervised their children. Parents spoke very highly of how teachers took such good care of their children by not only watching them but also by hearing children as they communicated with one another. Other important factors that determined enrollment in preschool had to do with the location and the operating hours of the preschool.

Convenience of location and hours. As most parents were working full time, it was important for all parents—as evidenced through individual interviews and the focus group—

that the preschool provided early drop-off and extended-day care. Parents needed the flexibility to be able to drop off their children at least an hour before starting work. This hour would give them enough time to commute to work. Along with the hours of operation, another factor that influenced enrollment in preschool had to do with the convenience of the location. Parents wanted their children to be close to their workplace so they would be able to reach them quickly if their children got sick or if an emergency occurred. A parent stated, "It's also very close to my office, and that was a consideration for me, after the tsunami in Japan" (Parent Kim).

Affordability. Parents expressed concern about how preschools in the area were expensive and unaffordable. A few parents even mentioned that they had friends who could not afford to send their children to preschool, so the children were being cared for either by a relative or a babysitter. Parents would often rule out preschools without even touring them, based on the price and hours of operation.

Parents in individual interviews as well as focus groups vocalized the importance of the affordability of the preschool. Some parents had toured preschools where tuition was well over $1,800 in the same area. One parent stated, "I knew it was an affordable preschool and I thought it would be a great place for my daughter to start" (Parent Michelle).

Theme 3: Ambivalent Feelings by Preschool Administrators, Teachers, and Parents about the Need to Become Accredited

If the preschool is already successful, there is no need for accreditation. The program director conveyed in her interview that convincing stakeholders to pursue NAEYC accreditation in itself is a tough challenge because of financial constraints. This effort becomes

even more challenging if the preschool is functioning at its fullest capacity with a waiting list, as was the case with this program. The program director believed that to convince stakeholders of the increased value that NAEYC accreditation would bring, a preschool administrator must be very knowledgeable and passionate about the field of early childhood education as well as NAEYC accreditation. In addition, program directors must be able to communicate clearly and effectively about the benefits of NAEYC accreditation.

The program director stated that she knew many directors in the field with the minimum qualifications of an AA degree, as required by Title 22 regulations. She stated that many directors are ill equipped with just an AA and do not have the necessary communication skills or enough depth of knowledge of the field of early childhood education to undertake NAEYC accreditation. She stated that for society to take the field of early childhood education more seriously, there need to be more educated directors who can advocate and pursue accreditation.

On the other hand, teachers' concerns and hesitations about the process were for personal issues. Certain teachers knew that they would be required to go back to school and pursue a degree, which for them would not be possible for various reasons, such as family commitments, financial constraints, or simply lack of motivation. Additionally some seasoned teachers who had over 15 years of experience saw no benefit in returning to school. Teachers also hesitated because they knew more work would be expected from them. They were already very busy and most of their extra work had to be volunteered, as this teacher stated: "You know, I did a lot of it at home on my bed at night. I couldn't, there is no time to do it here" (Teacher Lupe).

Another teacher stated:

> Well I guess, because anything that's new and you feel it's going to be a lot of work, of course you are going to be like, oh my gosh. So I guess everyone's reaction was like not in disbelief, but just, you know, just shocked. Because they, anytime you feel like your work load is going to be heavier, you get, you know, get nervous, just like it's human nature. (Teacher Keisha)

Teachers also voiced their concerns and hesitations about the process because they thought they were already operating in a high-caliber, quality program. Most teachers did not understand why they had to pursue accreditation if parents were happy and children were learning. Two teachers in particular had a hard time with the process and could not understand why accreditation was necessary. They had numerous meetings with the preschool director in which they expressed their concerns that NAEYC accreditation would put undue stress on them and therefore, interfere with their teaching. Both teachers had been at the school for many years and felt that accreditation would not necessarily bring quality to their preschool. These two teachers ended up leaving before accreditation was complete.

Parents had a different concern. They wondered if being accredited would mean paying higher tuition. They expressed their concerns about this to teachers as well as to the program director. However, upon being reassured that achieving NAEYC accreditation would not cause tuition to be raised, their concerns evaporated, and parents showed enthusiasm and excitement. Parents often mentioned that they were happy to see the preschool become NAEYC accredited because that would give them written evidence that the preschool was a high-quality program. Two out of the five parents knew about NAEYC prior to the preschool's announcement of the accreditation pursuit. These two parents were the most supportive of the school pursuing

accreditation and were surprised during the tour to find out that the program was not accredited.

A leadership role is essential in securing consent to seek accreditation. According to the program director, it was up to her to introduce and convince program stakeholders about the importance and benefits of NAEYC accreditation. The program director pointed out that administrators must be well versed in all the standards and criteria of NAEYC accreditation and must believe in and understand the importance of accreditation. The program director explained, "The previous directors had convinced them that it wasn't necessary, that it wasn't anything to pursue. . . . So I had to go back and let them understand the importance of it" (Program Director).

The program director had intentionally incorporated NAEYC criteria in the form of subtle policy changes 2 years prior to introducing NAEYC accreditation and its process to her staff. The program director stated:

> But what I started doing rather, was just preparing the teachers groundwork-wise, with reading more paperwork, professional development, you know, trainings, workshops without them knowing that we were preparing for accreditation 2 years prior to actually announcing it to them, or the Board. And then 2 years later I said "Ohhh, and by the way we are ready to pursue accreditation, the school is ready. (Program Director)

Based on her previous experience of going through the accreditation process, she knew that convincing the teachers to go through NAEYC accreditation was as tough as convincing the governing board. The program director explained:

> What happened at the school where I was working at prior to as the site supervisor, we went for NAEYC accreditation. I saw the response, based off the program director's approach to accreditation. I saw the internal response, and the fear amongst everybody. Their focus was off the children. They were focused on finishing the binders, having evidence to support, to support the curriculum, and all the stuff, and I am thinking to myself, well this is not why you do accreditation. (Program Director)

Before even announcing that the program would seek NAEYC accreditation, the program director started implementing a few NAEYC policies a month. During her weekly staff meetings, many discussions would take place about programs policies and procedures. For example, during one staff meeting, a comment was made about the school snack. As the conversations continued, they decided as a group that it would be best to cut juice from school snack. Teachers felt that this would reduce sugar intake as well as promote healthy oral hygiene. Therefore, the policy changed from serving juice to serving milk only. The director took advantage of the discussion on healthy oral hygiene and proposed that children should brush their teeth after nap time, which would also help promote healthy teeth. The staff took a vote, and a majority chose to implement teeth brushing as well. Little did the staff know that these two policy changes were a criteria in NAEYC.

Another reason the program director started making subtle changes to the program was to prevent the teachers from feeling resentment toward her. She stated, "I just started making small changes, very small changes, where it kind of became second nature to people. That way, one, the teachers do not feel kind of resentful towards you, like you're making me do all this work just to be accredited" (Program Director). The program director had noted that at her previous employment site that some coworkers had harbored resentment and ill feelings toward the director because the director had neglected to introduce and implement NAEYC criteria in a planned, tactful manner.

In the end, when the program director introduced the idea of seeking NAEYC accreditation, she still faced resistance and resentment from most of her staff. However, based on

her carefully planned tactics of introducing and implementing NAEYC criteria, she had an easier time calming her teachers and convincing them of the benefits of pursuing accreditation.

Hesitation, excitement, and concerns from administrators, teachers, and parents. The program director herself was very excited about the process and journey of going through the accreditation process. Having had exposure in the past with NAEYC accreditation, she did not have any reservations or concerns about the process or that it would bring improvements to the program. Her concerns lay more with how to convince the governing board, as prior directors had convinced the board that accreditation was not necessary. The program itself was doing well and had a waiting list, and this combined with previous directors' recommendations made it difficult for her to convince the board otherwise.

As a seasoned teacher and a highly educated individual, the program director had a deep, well-rounded knowledge of the field of early childhood education. She was very familiar with NAEYC criteria and knew that it was research driven. She realized that accreditation did benefit preschools in general, and that her program would not be an exception. Her goal at the outset of starting accreditation was to ensure that the stakeholders and teachers understood, valued, and believed in the importance and benefits that NAEYC accreditation would bring to their program.

As evidenced in individual interviews as well as through the focus group, teachers overall had concerns and hesitations about the process and how it would personally and professionally affect them. Certain teachers knew that they would be required to go back to school and pursue a degree, which for them would not be possible due to various reasons such as family commitments, personal reasons, financial constraints, or simply lack of motivation.

One teacher stated, “I have an Associate of Arts Degree, I don’t have a master’s, but you know, at my, I am 62, they are not going to pay me to get a master’s or a BA here” (Teacher Dania).

However, all teachers unanimously agreed both in individual interviews as well as at the focus group that although the process was frustrating, time consuming, and challenging, at the end it was worth it because it validated their teaching methods. Teachers mentioned that after accreditation, they could proudly point to certain things in the classroom and refer to it as a result of accreditation. For example, when parents were happy about the teeth-brushing policy, some teachers proudly said, “Yes, it is an accreditation criteria, and we also believe how important it is for children to learn how to keep their teeth healthy.” On the other hand, accreditation criteria were also used as a tool to help implement certain policies in the preschool. For example, when parents would insist that teachers administer over-the-counter medication to their children, teachers would simply say, “I am sorry, I can’t break the law, it is an NAEYC criteria, it helps ensure children’s safety.” As evidenced, accreditation can help raise the quality of preschool, but like many things in life, it comes with a hefty price tag.

Financial and time challenges. Besides having to convince the stakeholders about the importance and benefits of NAEYC accreditation, the other two major hurdles were time and financial constraints. Teachers and the program director expressed through individual interviews and the focus group that their daily schedule was busy, with a 30-minute lunch break. NAEYC accreditation process would require hundreds of hours of work to be completed outside of regular work hours, on tasks such as organizing and collecting evidence for all 417 criteria for program and classroom portfolios. However, 2 hours of overtime per day was the maximum that could be claimed. This meant that teachers would have to volunteer many hours

as well as work from home. One teacher said, “Oh my gosh, I was here a couple of nights to 9:00 at night” (Teacher Keisha). The program director stated, “We had to pay overtime, professional development hours, closing a few days for meetings, paying for luncheons for them during that time” (Program Director).

Financial constraints had to do with the program director being able to raise extra funds to establish and maintain NAEYC accreditation. For example, the program’s budget is set annually and covers fundamentals such as salaries, bills, insurance, and supplies. However, the first step in pursuing accreditation is to pay the NAEYC enrollment fees, which differ based on the size of the school. Additionally, as the preschool moves from one step to the next, there are further fees associated with each step. Table 4 indicates the costs associated with the NAEYC accreditation steps.

Table 4

Costs Associated with NAEYC Accreditation

Steps	Level 1 (10-60 children)	Level 2 (61-120 children)	Level 3 (121-240 children)	Level 4 (241-360 children)	Every additional 120 children
Step 1: Enrollment in Self-Study	$450	$575	$700	$825	Add $100
Step 2: Application/ Self-Assessment	$225	$300	$375	$450	Add $75
Steps 3 & 4: Candidacy/Site Visit (paid at candidacy)	$750	$875	$1,100	$1,300	Add $100

The program director stated, “It does take money in order to be accredited and stay accredited.” The program director also mentioned that it took about $10,000 to start the NAEYC accreditation process, which included purchasing office materials, additional toys for the

different classrooms, fees associated with each step of the NAEYC process, professional development hours for all the teachers, as well as money for two consultants. The additional toys that were bought for accreditation were documented in the form of photographs accompanied by an explanation of how the materials fit the criteria; the photographs were included in various classroom portfolios. For example, one of the preschool classrooms was lacking toys representing diversity. These toys included dolls from different ethnicities, posters depicting children and people with disabilities, as well as books written in the different languages spoken by children in the classroom.

Once these new materials were purchased and incorporated into the classroom, pictures were taken as children interacted with these materials. These pictures were later developed and labeled with a brief explanation of what was happening in the picture and which criteria was being met. For example, Criteria 3.F.05 of NAEYC states, "Teaching staff support the development and maintenance of children's home language whenever possible" (NAEYC, 2005g, p. 18). A picture of a child from the school reading a Spanish book served as evidence that Criteria 3.F.05 had been met. The picture had a brief note stating, "This child is reading a book that is written in her home language."

Professional development hours were documented by certificates and payments and were placed in various criteria in the program portfolio. NAEYC requires preschool teachers to keep up with professional growth as well as be trained in the program's assessment methods. Therefore, the teachers had to attend seminars and workshops as well as be formally trained in the program's assessment method for children. The seminars that teachers attended explored

topics such as setting limits with children, media and violence, activities that foster fine- and gross-motor skills, and activities that helped develop math and language skills.

Additionally, NAEYC recommends that programs work with consultants who come in at least twice a year and review the health and food policies. Therefore, a registered dietician was hired to work with the program's catering company to ensure that meals being served were the right quantity and quality as dictated by the US Food and Drug Administration. Another consultant (a pediatric registered nurse) was hired to go over the preschool polices on health to see if health policies reflected up-to-date research guidelines. Additionally, these two consultants would visit the program up to two times a year to make sure that the program's policies were aligned with current research. Quality in terms of teacher qualifications and food policy was not the only benefit that accreditation brought. Policies on health regulations as well as assessment for each child were other areas that also saw improvement.

Theme 4: Accreditation Brought Stricter Policies on Health Regulations, Qualified Teachers, Curriculum, Assessment, and Diversity

Stricter health and safety regulations. Earning NAEYC accreditation brought stricter policies pertaining to the health and safety of children in the program. Although teachers had always verbally reported children's injuries to parents (prior to accreditation), they now had to document it and place it in the children's files as well. This protocol was evident in the preschool staff handbook as well as in the program portfolio. All medication was now required to be labeled and administered only with authorization from the parent and the physician, whereas prior to accreditation nonprescription medication could be administered with authorization of the parent only. During the document analysis, this policy was noted in both staff and parent

handbooks, as well as in the program portfolio. For example, the preschool parent handbook states the following:

> Medication will need to be accompanied by the container from the doctor/pharmacy. Proper dosage instructions need to be clearly stated on the medication. A doctor's note or medication from a doctor's office with the child's name must be clearly printed on the medication that will need to be administered. Parents must complete an authorization to administer medication form.

Additionally, all medications were to be stored in a specified cabinet that is clearly marked and documented. Each medication must be accompanied by a form with the following information: name and birthdate of child; time, date, and dosage given; and signature of teacher administering the medication. This practice was noted through observations in each classroom, as well as in the program portfolio and staff and parent handbooks. As required by NAEYC, teachers were also trained by a registered nurse about medication administration, asthma inhalers, proper Epipen administration, and common childhood illnesses.

Other safety modifications included installing fire extinguishers both inside and outside and having them checked by the fire department on a regular basis. This evidence came from classroom observations as well as textual analysis through the staff handbook. Additionally, notes on children's allergies had to be posted in visible locations and were evidenced in the program portfolio as well as the staff and parent handbooks. Prior to accreditation, it was up to each teacher to determine a method of remembering which child had what allergy. Posting children's allergies in a clearly visible place made it easier for teachers to remember children's allergies.

Prior to NAEYC accreditation, supervision in the infant classroom was mainly by sight and some sound. After accreditation, all infants had to be visually supervised at all times. This

was written as policy in the parent and staff handbooks. Evidence was also found in the program portfolio. Both the director and the teachers in the infant classroom agreed with the new supervision policy because they believe that infants are very young and must be watched at all times. In addition to health regulations becoming much stricter, teachers also had to pursue professional growth hours and pursue a degree.

Qualified teachers. One of the reasons why teachers hesitate to pursue NAEYC accreditation is that they know they will have to go back to school to pursue a degree and continue their professional growth. The program director emphasized the importance of education and was appalled by the number of seasoned teachers who had just a few classes from various programs. She stated, "You only hold four classes and have been in the field for over 15 or 20 years" (Program Director). NAEYC accreditation forced seasoned teachers to go back to school and pursue their degrees. The program portfolio clearly depicted at least two teachers who had to go back to school. The program director stated:

> I have a staff here that's 54 years old, she does not have her AA degree. She has been here for 8 years. She has been in the field for 30 years, she is just now about to finish her AA degree, because for 4 years I have been on her. At first, she was, "I cannot do it, there is no reason, I will retire soon." Now, "Lily, I am so happy I am accomplishing this." (Program Director)

Furthermore, parents expressed both in individual interviews as well as the focus group how, after NAEYC accreditation, the academic program improved, as well as the quality of the teachers. One parent made the following comment:

> Now over the years that the director has changed the curriculum and it has become accredited and stuff, I feel like it has a great academic program for the kids. I feel like my second daughter has a much better academic experience than my first child did. I feel like there is a lot of developmental and academic combination. But I feel like she is working daily to learn her numbers and reading and writing and you know, allowing her creativity. I think they are hiring more experienced teachers and I like that. Lily is

> looking at their backgrounds and trying to hire more credentialed and experienced teachers, whereas 5 years ago, it was just kind of someone who wanted the job. (Parent Renee)

Teachers were observed facilitating children's learning processes by incorporating basic academics into their play. For example, in the toddler classroom, a teacher noticed a child pointing at a poster that depicted a scene from a zoo and proceeded to ask the child to name the animals. She then began citing small facts about the animals. Teachers in the infant classrooms were observed engaging with the infants and communicating constantly. For example, teachers would tell infants when they would be changed, fed, or placed in their cribs. When infants were awake, teachers would hold them and sing to them. Infants had plenty of physical as well as verbal stimulation. Teachers were observed writing in each child's journal anecdotal notes about their developmental milestones.

Additionally, the program director noticed that the preschool staff had built a stronger team as they collaborated and worked together on gathering evidence for classroom and program portfolios. She stated:

> I finally saw connections being made, genuine connections. People really understand each other. Why this person communicates this way or doesn't communicate that way. Why this person has a hard time doing whatever the case is, you know, because they finally started to get to know them as a person. (Program Director)

As they went through the accreditation process, the program's staff had clearly become closer, and their teaching methods were validated.

The preschool teachers felt that as a team their bond had become stronger as they worked and helped each other out through the accreditation process. They explained that the process was arduous, time consuming, and at times challenging and that they depended on each other at many points. This dynamic was evident in their individual interviews and even more strongly

articulated through the focus group. Observations throughout the 2 months of conducting research also showed the teachers in happy moods on a daily basis, having friendly side conversations with each other and even planning dinners and lunches over weekends. One teacher even mentioned that she was going on a short trip with another teacher in the school.

Standardized curriculum and assessment. Going through the NAEYC accreditation self-study process allowed the teachers and administration to see what improvements were needed in the area of curriculum, which included children's assessment as well. After achieving NAEYC accreditation, the program was able to implement a research-based, unified, preprinted curriculum throughout the entire preschool and to implement an assessment as well. Prior to accreditation, curriculum was left at the discretion of each teacher and children were not formally assessed. The new curriculum provided consistency and a predictable routine, including open-ended activities and materials, and activities that allow for older children and children with advanced skills to model for younger children or those who haven't yet attained the skill.

The new preprinted curriculum (FunShine Express Curriculum) fostered creativity and promoted social/emotional, cognitive, language, and physical development by providing a wide range of hands-on, interactive materials that allow children to experiment and explore. The preprinted curriculum came in kits with activity and project suggestions were aligned with specific learning goals and objectives. The preprinted curriculum offers specific daily activities that target social/emotional, cognitive, language, and physical development. For example, on the day of the observation, the daily curriculum suggested that teachers pour sand or salt in a tray and allow children to trace letters or numbers in the tray. Younger children were allowed to draw lines or simply scribble.

The implementation of the new curriculum and child assessments was evidenced in multiple sources, such as the parent and staff handbooks, classroom observations, and data analysis. Teachers were observed in the toddler and preschool classrooms for not only how they followed the curriculum but also how they enhanced it with supplemental activities. For example, the preschool classroom was learning about the cycle of the butterfly. The preprinted lesson plan of the day included a picture of a butterfly with the letter B written on the right side of the paper. Teachers were to introduce the concept of the butterfly cycle and introduce the letter B. The teacher in this classroom further supplemented the lesson plan by purchasing a pavilion that housed dozens of butterfly larvae, which eventually turned into butterflies.

NAEYC accreditation also meant that formal assessment would be used to track each child's development and growth in social/emotional, physical, and academic domains. The Ages & Stages Questionnaires (ASQ) was used to determine whether children were meeting the developmental milestones. The ASQ is a questionnaire designed to help parents check their child's development. Parents use the results of the ASQ to talk with pediatricians, teachers, or other professionals if they have concerns about their child's development. The core of ASQ is a series of 20 questionnaires that correspond to age intervals, from birth to 6 years. Each questionnaire contains simple questions for parents to answer about activities their child is (or is not) able to do. The answers are scored and help determine whether the child's development is on schedule or whether the child should be referred for a developmental checkup with a professional. Activities discussed in each questionnaire reflect developmental milestones for each age group. Parents can learn more about what to expect their child to be able to do at each stage of development.

In addition, teachers gathered a portfolio for each child that consisted of the following: photos of the child interacting, playing, and meeting developmental milestones; language samples (dictated stories, records of conversation); anecdotal notes (written notes highlighting typical or significant events); and writing and drawing samples. The contents of the portfolio, along with the ASQ assessment, help provide a solid assessment of each child's developmental milestones. It is also important to note that the ASQ takes into consideration the child's cultural

context and lack of opportunity to practice skills, stating that these factors might contribute to a child receiving a low score.

In addition to stricter health policies, unified curriculum, and higher qualified teachers, NAEYC accreditation helped bring in diversity on an administrative as well as a classroom level.

Diversity. NAEYC's statement on diversity notes the following:

> Young children and their families reflect a great and rapidly increasing diversity of language and culture. The National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC) recommendations emphasize that early childhood programs are responsible for creating a welcoming environment that respects diversity, supports children's ties to their families and community, and promotes both second language acquisition and preservation of children's home languages and cultural identities. Linguistic and cultural diversity is an asset, not a deficit, for young children. (NAEYC, 2009c)

The program director explained that diversity in the preschool was very important for her. The program handbook states the following:

> We believe that a diverse place to learn, grow, and develop is necessary for every child in our care. We welcome parents to come to the preschool and volunteer hours in their child's classroom to share their heritage with the other children. We also work with children with different developmental needs as well as children with dietary restrictions

> or food philosophies. We strongly believe in supporting families and children in helping to build bridges to aide in building diversity and understanding amongst one another. We build diversity by involving parents and children in curriculum.

According to the program director, NAEYC accreditation helped bring in diversity on two levels: administration and classroom representation. As diversity and inclusion are an important component in NAEYC accreditation, the program director herself strongly believed in this as well. She stated the following:

> It was really hard for the families, and that was another reason why I sought out accreditation. I didn't want to turn families away because the Board said, "Well, we're not getting paid enough, so 'no' to accept the subsidy." And I said, "Well, if we get accredited, they'll pay more if we get accredited and we can accept these families." Because I feel like every preschool should be a true representation of our society, on every level. I didn't want children just from an affluent type of background to be coming here, and the children in low income were not able to receive the same type of educational services. (Program Director)

Interviews with both the site supervisor and the program director indicated that the school was allowed to gain funding in the form of subsidies from the state that helped pay full tuition for children from low-socioeconomic backgrounds. This support was further evidenced in the program portfolio through checks written to the school from the state of California to pay for tuition. This assistance was not available prior to NAEYC accreditation, hence it is an incentive offered by the state to NAEYC-accredited centers. At the time of this study, a total of 10 families were on fully subsidized care.

Furthermore, the program director added:

> I want people who work in preschools to understand that we can't see color. We can't see race, ethnicity, we can't see social class, we have to accept everyone for who they are and where they are in their life and bring them to the level we want to bring them. And that's another thing about accreditation, it demands that. It demands the level of, you know, a reflection within yourself, you know, how open are you to different cultures and nationalities? (Program Director)

Evidence of diversity was throughout the school with the attendance of parents and their children. Also, admission policies reflected the importance of attracting and maintaining diversity not only in the preschool families but also in the preschool staff, as evidenced in both teacher and staff handbooks.

On a classroom level, teachers had to make sure that their toys and visual artifacts such as posters reflected diversity. One teacher stated, "So, the classroom did meet NAEYC criteria, but like the multiculturalism, our classrooms did not have too much of that" (Site Supervisor). The lack of representation of multiculturalism in the classroom was not intentional but rather ignorance.

Toys and artifacts that portrayed multiculturalism were observed in the classrooms in the form of dolls that were of different ethnicities, posters and figurines that depicted children with disabilities, as well as lesson plans in which books about multiculturalism were read and were available in the library. Books in different languages were also available in the classroom, representing the ethnicity of families present in class. These observations were also evidenced in the classroom portfolio. The program director was very proud of all the achievements in the program, but most of all she was excited to see how diversity took on a different definition in her program. She believed that the NAEYC accreditation process helped her not only make the program better but also helped legitimize the field.

Lesson plans also depicted how multiculturalism was implemented into the classroom. For example, one of the preschool lesson plans stated that on Monday, a parent of a child was going to come at circle time and present about Ethiopia. Snack for that day was going to be Ethiopian food provided by the parent. Later, the preschool teacher explained that every month

she has a different parent coming in to talk about his or her cultural background and build a poster reflecting that cultural background. The poster would then be up for the whole month, and children would learn about that country throughout that month. Activities would include making an art project that reflected Ethiopia, eating snacks from Ethiopia, as well as learning some simple words in the national language.

Legitimized field of early childhood education. The program director, teachers, and parents unanimously believed that NAEYC accreditation helped the governance board, and the parents acknowledged and saw the importance of the field of early childhood education. The site supervisor stated:

> Accreditation is to help parents understand we are a school and not just like a managed day care, you come in and go when you want. It's to help them understand that we do have goals for the children, that we do want them to learn and develop, and to understand that we teachers have a standard to ourselves and that we are not just babysitting their children for 8 hours a day. We are working on them developing socially or other skills that might not be, you know easy for them to see, instantly, right away. And a parent says "Yeah, my child did this," but 5 months later, you have parents that say "Yeah, you really have been working on this because I see a difference in their behavior at home, or the way they are understanding this concept." And that's where accreditation helps, 'cause then they understand that we do have these things we work on with children." (Site Supervisor)

Furthermore, the program director stated in her interview that she used NAEYC accreditation criteria to help the governance board understand the importance of early childhood development in terms of gross motor growth. The program prior to accreditation lacked a play structure and canopy to protect children against the sun. The program director noted:

> So I used NAEYC accreditation to show them the importance of having a gross motor development structure and a canopy to protect their little skin. I mean, it's 10 degrees hotter on asphalt. So I brought all those reports to my Board meetings. Ten degrees

> hotter on asphalt. Well, right here, the glare of the Pacific Ocean hitting the blacktop. These kids burn just by walking outside. It's our ethical responsibility to take care of them plus we're church affiliated. (Program Director)

Although the parents had enrolled their children in preschool prior to accreditation and had perceptions that it was a high-caliber functioning school (apparent from parent surveys as well as individual interviews and the focus group), they felt that NAEYC accreditation brought accountability. A parent stated, "I think the program is great, because it is going to hold programs accountable to a higher standard and always encourage to continue to build and be better" (Parent Michelle). Another parent mentioned that a preschool being NAEYC accredited meant that it was functioning at a higher caliber and was important. She further explained by saying, "You know, I am in a custody situation, so my son's father has part custody. And so, I felt that with NAEYC accreditation, it would be just that much easier to kind of not have an issue with him" (Parent Renee).

Overall stamp of quality and validation of their previous practices. Although every teacher spoke about the challenges of the accreditation process in both individual interviews and focus groups, they also all agreed that the process is worthwhile because, in the end, they felt validated. They felt their previous practices were being validated because that is what NAEYC accreditation asked for. They felt their school had now achieved the stamp of quality. One teacher said the following:

> You know, 'cause the parents, it's like you're driving a beemer, you know what I mean? Seriously, and it's like when a teacher, when parents hear that your school is accredited, its good. That's the school I want my child to be in. Some of them don't even know a clue of what it is, but having that title behind your school's name is a very good thing, and that shows your school is qualified. (Teacher Yula)

As mentioned, all the parents surveyed had enrolled their children in the preschool prior to NAEYC accreditation and had been happy with what the preschool had to offer at that time. This attitude was evident in parent surveys prior to accreditation. Later, through interviews and focus groups, they expressed happiness that the school had achieved NAEYC accreditation because they felt that accreditation validated their hard work. One parent said, "You know, to be able to acknowledge people when they have done a great job, and acknowledge a school when it's been doing everything it can to help your kids, you know?" (Parent Kimberly).

The program director believed that accreditation provided a stamp of quality because the school was held to a certain standard. When asked what achievements developed after NAEC accreditation, she mentioned the following:

> I think more accountability to one another is something that's the biggest change. um, holding each other to a higher standard. Holding yourself to a higher standard. Um, understanding that you are part of something great, and you want to get education. Teachers saying "Now I need to get my associates degree, 'cause we're accredited." (Program Director)

Furthermore, as the director spread the news of accreditation, she noticed that prospective parents were under the impression that the preschool had already been accredited, and although they could not really articulate what NAEYC accreditation was all about, they knew that NAEYC accreditation was linked to quality. In her interview, the program director stated:

> It was interesting hearing people's responses, I wanted to hear it. "Oh, other schools are accredited now. We were wondering why you are not accredited?" Then I started noticing new parents come in, when I would give tours, I would throw that out there. "Oh and we are seeking NAEYC accreditation right now." You know, they didn't even know how to pronounce NAEYC acronym, they didn't even know what it stood for, other than they knew it was something about quality. (Program Director)

NAEYC accreditation brought quality on different levels to the program, but no system is perfect and NAEYC certainly has its shortfalls.

Theme 5: Feedback from Administration and Teachers for NAEYC

Both administration and teachers agreed that the NAEYC accreditation process was lengthy, arduous, stressful, and time consuming; however, they also agreed that all their hard work was worth it and that they would recommend NAEYC accreditation to other schools as well as go through the reaccreditation process upon expiration. This attitude was observed in individual interviews as well as at the focus group. With this in mind, administration and teachers also stated that NAEYC could do a better job of reducing the redundancy of criteria in both classroom and program portfolios. They found it difficult and time consuming to go back and find the previous evidence, make copies, relabel it, and then file it with the new criteria. This added to the time pressure and frustration of the staff.

On the administration level, the program director had many recommendations. She felt that NAEYC could do a better job to help program directors achieve NAEYC accreditation. The director suggested a mentoring program where a program director who is interested in pursuing NAEYC accreditation could be paired with another program director who has already gone through this process. The program director stated, "It is a very difficult task to achieve, you almost need, like, a very dynamic leader to pull this through. When, when in all actuality, it takes so much work, time, and energy to do it" (Program Director).

The program director had also noticed that NAEYC accreditation standards and criteria can contain vocabulary and concepts that the average credentialed preschool teacher might not understand: "One thing that the teachers were frustrated about, sometimes the vocabulary for

them was a bit much" (Program Director). This potential challenge was one reason why the program director felt that directors themselves must be well educated in order to be able to help their staff. She further stated:

> We are putting the least qualified on an academic level in the classroom with the children to prepare them for kindergarten. . . . They just didn't have it, they couldn't even describe it, explain to parents, what their children were learning, because they didn't have their education. They don't even have the vocabulary. (Program Director)

When asked to give a few examples, the director provided the following criteria as an example of difficult vocabulary: Criteria 3.G.11 (NAEYC, 2005g) states that teachers are able to determine the different components of a task and break it into meaningful and achievable parts. Furthermore, she said words such as *discern, nonverbal cues,* and *collaborative inquiry* were some examples of how the vocabulary can be challenging to a typical preschool teacher who might have only a few college classes under her belt.

Furthermore, she also felt that the hotline set up for programs going through NAEYC accreditation needed more staffing. She expressed frustration at having called the hotline and leaving numerous voicemails that took days to be answered. She stated, "When you call there, you don't easily get a live person anymore. It takes days for them to get back to you. So you really have to be a go-getter, you really have to be committed to reading materials, you know?" (Program Director).

The program director strongly felt that the amount of money needed to pull NAEYC accreditation was a major deterrent for preschools to pursue NAEYC accreditation. She explained, "It does take a lot of money to be accredited. Because even down through Xerox copies, even down to binders, the office supplies. Having teachers, you know, paying teachers overtime, because you want them to feel valued" (Program Director). She went on to explain

other financial obligations such as professional development hours and having special guest speakers. Attendance at professional development workshops as well as the presence of guest speakers was evidenced in the program portfolio in the form of certificates of attendance by teachers and bills paid to special speakers.

Additionally, the program director felt that NAEYC had to do more on its behalf to make sure that financial constraints were not keeping program directors from pursuing NAEYC accreditation:

> So, I think honestly, talking to other people, um, in different areas of Los Angeles, they would love to be accredited. They can't afford it. Either their, you know, their schools are 85%-plus subsidy programs and the parents cannot even afford lunch on a daily basis, regardless of taking time off work to come and volunteer hours, or whatever the case is. So I really think it's about the budget. And I think what accreditation needs is to do a better job finding a way to scholarship schools into being accredited. (Program Director)

The program director further stated:

> Because really, if they say they are about the whole child development, every child having an equal education and opportunity, then they should look back at their practices and see how much they charge on an annual basis to maintain accreditation, and why these other schools have a hard time going through it. They should either work, you know, they should maybe develop partnerships with different types of programs, like First LA. (Program Director)

Finally, the program director felt that once NAEYC accreditation was achieved, it was completely left to the program director's discretion to make sure that NAEYC accreditation standards and criteria were being followed and maintained. The program director stated, "I think it's another thing NAEYC needs to somehow find a way to address. That just because you got the stamp of NAEYC accreditation, you know, there needs to be some way of monitoring the system" (Program Director).

The five themes that emerged from this study provided insight into factors that motivated or discouraged preschool administrators in terms of pursuing accreditation, the types of changes that NAEYC accreditation brought to their preschool, and how perceptions of NAEYC accreditation changed for the stakeholders of the program. The answers to the research questions clearly illustrate the challenges that programs face and what benefits NAEYC accreditation can provide.

Research Questions Answered

Question 1: What Motivates or Discourages Preschool Administrators in Terms of Pursuing NAEYC Accreditation?

Discouraging factors.

Convincing stakeholders. Having had prior experience with going through the NAEYC accreditation, the program director knew that before NAEYC accreditation could even be pursued, she would first have to convince stakeholders of the importance and benefits of pursuing NAEYC accreditation. Convincing stakeholders to move forward with NAEYC accreditation becomes even more challenging if the preschool is successful and functioning to its fullest capacity, with a waiting list. Why pursue NAEYC accreditation and spend money when a preschool functions to its fullest capacity? The program director emphasized that this is why it is important for preschool administrators to have a deep knowledge in the field of early childhood education and the leadership skills to help convince stakeholders of the importance and benefits of NAEYC accreditation. The program director stated that one must be educated enough to know about the ins and outs of accreditation and have the skill of communicating and convincing the governance council and teachers that NAEYC accreditation is worth achieving.

Another reason it was difficult for stakeholders of the program to get on the bandwagon of pursuing accreditation was the additional costs that would be required.

Financial constraints. Funding must be secured for paying teachers overtime, financing their professional development, purchasing office materials to create and organize the classroom and program portfolios, covering the cost of printing hundreds of pictures to be filed as evidence in classroom portfolios, and making necessary purchases for educational materials and toys. Further funds are needed to order the self study-materials and to pay the fees required as the program advances through the accreditation process. Also, the bigger the schools are, the higher the fees. Table 4 lists the fees necessary to advance through the four steps of the accreditation process.

Time and personal constraints. Teachers as stakeholders have their own reservations and concerns both personally and professionally. Personally, teachers have heard that the NAEYC process is difficult and time consuming, and most of the teachers already feel like their plate isfull. They are afraid of having to do more work and wonder if they will even be compensated for it. Teachers also have reservations because they do not know how it will affect their teaching methods, styles, and overall classroom pedagogy.

According to the director, as evidenced in the interview, once the stakeholders are on board, the program director needs to gain the support and interest of the preschool staff. This represents an equally difficult task, because the teachers themselves will be required to help implement NAEYC accreditation criteria, and to collect and organize documentation in classroom portfolios. As one teacher noted, “Again weekends I was working, I can’t tell you,

it was very, very hard, until midnight, after midnight, my daughter, my husband, you know, I cannot be in the family gatherings as I have a lot of work to do" (Teacher Dania).

Professionally, teachers are worried because they know they will have to go back to school and keep up with their professional development hours. Going back to school would require them to pay out of their own pocket and take time away from their families and personal lives.

Motivating factors.

Diversity and Funding. According to the program director, NAEYC accreditation could also help boost diversity at the school—her primary motivating factor for pursuing NAEYC accreditation. The preschool would be required to bring in families from all walks of life, such as people with different abilities and disabilities, varying ethnic backgrounds, children from families with same-sex marriages, and families from different socioeconomic backgrounds. In return, the state will help subsidize tuition for families who are not able to afford it. NAEYC-accredited programs are eligible to receive subsidies from state and federal government. These subsidies are used to help pay tuition for families who come from low socio-economic backgrounds. The preschool was able to bring in 20 families whose tuition was fully subsidized through the state.

Another form of advertisement. Furthermore, the accredited program will have the additional benefit of advertising their preschool on NAEYC's website, where all accredited preschools are named. Parents across the country can search for NAEYC-accredited programs within a preferred radius of their home or employment.

Question 2: What are the Changes that Administrators, Teachers, and Parents Believe

NAEYC Accreditation has Brought to their Preschool?

Diversity. The program director believed that bringing in diversity was the biggest achievement from NAEYC accreditation and was her primary motivating factor in pursuing NAEYC accreditation. Diversity came on two levels: program and classroom. At the program level, policies were implemented to admit families with same-sex partners. This was a huge accomplishment for the director, as the center was a faith-based program. The program director used NAEYC standards to explain to the governing board that quality preschools should not be excluding children. She was able to articulate to the governing board that diversity did not just mean people from different ethnic backgrounds but also people with different abilities and disabilities, and from same-sex marriages and different socioeconomic backgrounds. Through NAEYC's accreditation standards, the program director was able to further the component of diversity in the preschool through subsidized tuition from the state for low-income families. Therefore, after NAEYC accreditation, the program was also able to receive full subsidy from the state and was able to enroll 20 low-income families.

Additionally, classrooms implemented multicultural materials such as dolls, posters, books, and materials featuring people with different abilities and disabilities or people from different ethnic backgrounds. Teachers implemented diversity by inviting parents to create posters and speak about their cultural heritage and present it to the classroom. The posters would stay up for the whole month and children would participate in different activities from that particular country. For example, a parent came and spoke about Ethiopia and presented a poster that depicted Ethiopia's landmarks, traditional foods, national costumes, and language

samples. Throughout the month, children learned Ethiopian words and ate Ethiopian traditional foods for snacks.

Unified curriculum and assessment for children. Achieving NAEYC accreditation also helped the program director realize the weaknesses in her program. One weakness was that the preschool did not have a research-based curriculum or an assessment protocol of children's development. This was evidenced in the NAEYC report under the section of curriculum, which received a score of 80% out of 100% and was also documented in individual interviews and the focus group by teachers and administration. Therefore, upon receiving NAEYC accreditation, based on NAEYC's report, the program director implemented a unified preprinted curriculum (FunShine Express Curriculum) throughout the school as well as a research-based assessment plan–the Ages & Stages Questionnaire (ASQ)–for every child. The program director stated:

> And then after accreditation happened, some things that I saw based off our scoring of the binders, um, because one thing I loved about accreditation is the self-study process, it is an opportunity for you to improve what's already out there. So after they did the whole accreditation, that was something that was a little bit weak, was our curriculum. (Program Director)

The unified curriculum implemented throughout the school helped children develop socially/emotionally as well as academically and provided continuum from one classroom to the other. Furthermore, the preprinted curriculum helped the teachers bridge what they were doing at school with what could be done at home. For example, children in the preschool classrooms had worksheets that were meant to go home with parents. These worksheets provided parents with ideas of what children had worked on at school and gave the parent ideas of how they could further supplement their children's learning at home. The program director stated:

> So I think that having the curriculum, it definitely helps the quality of the program, because parents know what to expect, and if you tell them it's preprinted they can refer to it, they can bridge activities that we do at school at home, which is always helpful because we want to work as a team. (Program Director)

In addition to the implementation of the new curriculum, the program started using the ASQ questionnaire to help track children's development and assess their skills.

Stamp of quality and accountability. The director of the preschool felt that NAEYC accreditation provided accountability and an official stamp of the high quality of their preschool:

> I feel everything should be in writing. One thing I learned working in administration, if we have things in writing, people adhere to it. You have to have it in writing. So what's nice about accreditation, it's in writing. And then you have people that are already along with it. You have people [saying] "That's great, programs that are already accredited." So to be affiliated with programs like that is something that makes you feel a part of something that's great. I don't know anybody that doesn't, you know. (Program Director)

Teachers expressed through individual interviews as well as during the focus group that the preprinted curriculum that was implemented after NAEYC accreditation provided them universal guidelines that encompassed social/emotional and academic domains of child development. Teachers also expressed contentment with the fact that now everyone in the school was following a universal curriculum, and this helped children with their development and growth as they moved from one class to the next. Although the preprinted curriculum was already planned and handed down to them, they had the support of the administration to supplement it with additional activities. They also felt that a preprinted curriculum was helpful for parents to continue the discussion at home with their children. As one teacher explained, "So far were all on the same page at the school, so for me, it's easier to talk to parents about,

because you know parents are always asking, what are you trying, what are you doing?" (Teacher Keisha).

In individual interviews as well as through the focus group, teachers unanimously expressed their belief that NAEYC accreditation was a stamp of quality for their school, which even before accreditation was functioning at a quality level. They felt this way because as they progressed through the process of accreditation, the teachers realized that their past classroom practices were validated by what NAEYC was asking in the criteria. One teacher noted that "having accreditation as a title behind your school name is a very good thing, that shows your school is qualified" (Teacher Yula).

Team building. When a preschool is functioning at a quality level and is accredited through NAEYC, many factors have to be in place. One factor being that communication at many levels is present and effective. A successful program can help legitimize the importance of early childhood education by practicing strong communication, which can also help build a strong team. The program director noticed that the staff became stronger as a team as they collaborated on gathering evidence for classroom and program portfolios. She stated:

> I finally saw connections being made, genuine connections. People really understand each other. Why this person communicates this way or doesn't communicate that way. Why this person has a hard time doing whatever the case is, you know, because they finally started to get to know them as a person. (Program Director)

The preschool teachers felt that as a team their bond became stronger as they worked and helped each other out through the accreditation process. They explained that the process was arduous, time consuming, and at times challenging, and at many times they depended on each other. This was evident in their individual interviews and even more strongly articulated through the focus group.

Qualified teachers. The NAEYC accreditation process forced seasoned teachers to go back to school and pursue their degrees. The program portfolio clearly depicted at least two teachers who had to go back to school. Another two who refused to go to school decided to quit the program. The program director eventually hired two new teachers who both possessed AA degrees. The program director stated:

> I have a staff here that's 54 years old; she does not have her AA degree. She has been here for 8 years. She has been in the field for 30 years; she is just now about to finish her AA degree, because for 4 years I have been on her. At first she was "I cannot do it, there is no reason, I will retire soon." Now, "Lily, I am so happy I am accomplishing this." (Program Director)

Additionally, teachers had to attend professional development growth hours and be kept abreast of the field of early childhood education. Furthermore, teachers unanimously felt that they became better teachers because they were forced to think outside of the box to come up with additional activities that helped strengthen children's social/emotional and academic skills. As one teacher explained during her interview, "Oh my God, we have to do everything. We had to do a lot of fine motor activities, music activities, and large motor activities" (Teacher Yula).

Stricter health and safety regulations. Achievement of NAEYC accreditation brought stricter policies pertaining to the health and safety of children in the program. For example, all medication had to be labeled and administered only with authorization from the parent and the physician, whereas prior to accreditation, nonprescription medication could be administered with authorization of the parent only. This policy was noted in both staff and parent handbooks, as well as in the program portfolio.

Additionally, all medications are now stored in a specified cabinet that is clearly marked and documented. Each medication must be accompanied by a form with the following information: name and birthdate of child; time, date, and dosage given; and signature of teacher administering the medication. As required by NAEYC, teachers were also trained by a registered nurse regarding medication administration, asthma inhalers, proper EpiPen administration, and common childhood illnesses.

Other safety modifications included installing fire extinguishers both inside and outside, to be checked by the fire department on a regular basis. Additionally, children's allergies had to be posted in visible locations and were evidenced in the program portfolio as well as the staff and parent handbooks. Prior to accreditation, it was up to each teacher to determine his or her own method for remembering which child had what allergy. Posting children's allergies in a clearly visible place made it easier for teachers to remember children's allergies.

Prior to NAEYC accreditation, supervision in the infant classroom was mainly by sight and some sound. After accreditation, all infants had to be visually supervised at all times. Both the administrator and the teachers in the infant classroom agreed with the new supervision policy because they realized that infants are very young and must be watched at all times.

Question 3: How Do Administrators', Teachers', and Parents' Perceptions and Evaluations of the Preschool Change Following NAEYC Accreditation?

The NAEYC accreditation process was worthwhile. Although teachers stressed repeatedly that the process of NAEYC accreditation was arduous, lengthy, and repetitive, they also believed very strongly that the process was worthwhile and that it provided validation of their practices. They even mentioned that 5 years down the road when it was time to renew accreditation, they would not have any hesitations.

NAEYC accreditation serves as a stamp of quality. Administration, teachers, and parents all felt that NAEYC accreditation was a stamp of quality. Parents were actually happy to see that the preschool they loved and entrusted with their children could now have the accreditation attached to its name. One parent stated, "It's just what to expect, it's an acknowledgement" (Parent Renee). Another parent added, "Well, it was very nice, because I love it here, so when you're happy with somewhere, it's good to see that it gets appreciated" Parent Kimberly).

NAEYC Accreditation Helped Legitimize the Field of Early Childhood Education. According to the program director, NAEYC accreditation provided more than a stamp of quality. NAEYC accreditation placed the preschool among an "elite" group of schools that was already accredited. The director mentioned that it was good to be a part of something "greater." Additionally, the director realized that the process gave her the tools to explain to the board the importance of early childhood education, which enabled the school to raise funds to put in a new play structure as well as a canopy to provide shade. She felt that NAEYC accreditation helped legitimize the field of early education.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative study was to document the factors that inhibited or influenced the decision by preschool administrators, teachers, and parents to seek NAEYC accreditation and embark on the lengthy self-study and documentation process leading to NAEYC final approval.

Seeking NAEYC accreditation provides a major challenge for preschool administrators on many levels. First, preschool administrators must possess certain knowledge, coupled with excellent communications skills, to be able to convince stakeholders of the importance of NAEYC accreditation. This can become even more complicated if the preschool is functioning at its fullest capacity with a waiting list.

Once the preschool director captures the interest and consent of stakeholders on moving forward with NAEYC accreditation, the preschool director is presented with the next challenge: being able to convince the teachers of the importance of NAEYC accreditation. Once this is achieved, the next challenge is the financial challenge, because as the program director stated, it takes money to get accreditation and money to retain accreditation. Accreditation also brought many changes that contributed to the quality of the preschool. For example, a standardized curriculum was implemented along with assessments for children, and teachers were required to go back to school for a degree and to continue with professional development. Stricter policies were enforced on health and safety regulations. Although NAEYC accreditation is described as time consuming, redundant, and arduous, teachers felt the process was well worth it because it provided validation, a stronger bond between the teachers was made, and it provided a stamp of quality for parents. Finally, diversity on many levels was incorporated into the preschool, in the form of multicultural toys and artifacts in classrooms, and

fully subsidized tuition from the state to help bring in low-income families.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

Chapter five is organized into five parts: (a) summary of the study, (b) discussion of findings, (c) significance of findings and the implications of the study, (d) recommendations for the site and future research, and (e) conclusion. In the summary of the study, the purpose of the study and the three questions that helped guide this research are restated. The discussion of the findings further examines the five themes. The section on the significance of the findings discusses what implications the findings of this study have on the field of early childhood education and NAEYC accreditation. Finally, the chapter concludes with the researchers recommendations for the research site, the field, and for future research.

Summary of the Study

Restatement of Purpose of Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to document the factors that inhibited or influenced the decision to seek NAEYC accreditation by parents, teachers, and administrators. This study provided insights into the beliefs and perceptions of the administration, teaching staff, and a group of parents at a private preschool located in Los Angeles to understand how their views influenced the decision to seek and achieve NAEYC accreditation. By studying the factors that prevented or shaped the decision to pursue NAEYC accreditation, this research helped illuminate why so few preschools in the United States are NAEYC accredited and what can be done to help reverse this trend.

Research Questions

This study addressed three research questions about directors', teachers', and parents' perceptions about NAEYC accreditation:

1. What motivates or discourages preschool administrators in terms of pursuing NAEYC accreditation?
2. What changes do administrators, teachers, and parents believe accreditation will bring about at their preschool?
3. How do administrators', teachers', and parents' perceptions and evaluations of the preschool change following NAEYC accreditation?

Summary of Findings

Research from this case study revealed that NAEYC accreditation can help raise quality of the preschool. Quite a few motivating factors helped convince the stakeholders to pursue NAEYC accreditation. The first was that the program would now be able to receive full subsidies from the state to help pay for tuition for children from low-socioeconomic backgrounds. Prior to accreditation, the state would pay half or less than half of tuition. Upon achieving accreditation, the program became more diverse by including children from low-income backgrounds and children from same-sex marriages; classrooms now contained toys, posters, and books that reflected different ethnicities from around the world and people with different abilities and disabilities. Finally, the program would have an additional marketing strategy, which is the ability to advertise itself on a national search program of NAEYC-accredited programs.

Although there are motivating factors for program directors to seek NAEYC accreditation, several discouraging factors stand in the way of the program director in seeking

NAEYC accreditation. One of the biggest discouraging factors was the difficult process of securing consent from stakeholders to pursue accreditation. The stakeholders in this case included the governing board as well as the program staff. It was difficult to convince the board of the need to pursue accreditation because prior program directors had convinced them that accreditation was not necessary, as the program was functioning to its fullest capacity already. Furthermore, it was going to cost money to start and maintain accreditation. The second challenge was to secure funding to start and maintain accreditation, and the third challenge was to convince the staff to work long hours for many months on a volunteer basis. Although the teachers were getting paid for 2 hours extra per day, it was nothing compared to working many long hours, sometimes until midnight, as well as weekends.

Once NAEYC accreditation was earned, preschool parents, teachers, and administrators saw improvements that further raised the quality of their preschool. For example, the program implemented a preprinted universal curriculum throughout the school as well as a research-based assessment for all children. Additionally, teachers without degrees were required to pursue their degree, and all teachers had to attend regular professional development hours. This change clearly raised the quality of all the teachers in the school. Teachers also stated that their hard work as a team made their bond stronger and that their previous classroom practices were validated as they realized they were already practicing most required criteria. Finally, policies pertaining to the health and safety of children in the program became stricter, and the school integrated more diversity in terms of welcoming children from same-sex marriages, families from low-socioeconomic backgrounds, and the implementation of multiculturalism materials in all classrooms.

Perceptions of the preschool by parents, teachers, and administrators also changed drastically after NAEYC accreditation. First, they all felt that although it was arduous and lengthy, the process was well worth it because it validated their past practices as well as served as a stamp of quality. Teachers even mentioned that they would look forward to the reaccreditation process 5 years down the road and would encourage other preschools to seek NAEYC accreditation as well. Additionally, the program staff and the administrators were able to raise awareness about the field of early childhood education by explaining to parents the importance of their preschool's using NAEYC's standards, as the standards are research based.

Discussion of Findings

It is clear from this study that NAEYC accreditation can indeed help raise the quality of a preschool. Additionally, research from the literature review confirmed that NAEYC-accredited programs had higher overall quality than nonaccredited programs (Bowman et al., 2001; Cryer, 2003; Helburn; 1995, Helburn & Bergmann, 2002; Lombardi; 2003; Whitebook et al., 1997). According to Jorde Bloom, (1996), a longitudinal study found that accredited programs had staff who were better trained, provided more developmentally appropriate activities, and experienced less turnover in staff. The conclusions of this study are significant because the findings align with NAEYC criteria and prove that NAEYC accreditation standards help raise quality of the program. For example, the Department of Social Services requires only 12 college units in order to become a preschool teacher; the NAEYC, on the other hand, requires one teacher from each classroom to earn, at minimum, an AA degree by 2015. It is obvious that possessing a higher degree would improve a teacher's competence. Teachers with degrees would have more

skills and have up-to-date research knowledge on how to implement best practices, and therefore, help sustain the quality of the program (Gerber et al., 2007).

Bredekamp (1993) conducted another study, which concluded that NAEYC-accredited centers paid their teachers more and provided benefits that were better than those at nonaccredited centers. For example, the part-time teachers received prorated benefits, which is a criteria of NAEYC. This would help explain why previous research concluded that accredited centers had less staff turnover than nonaccredited centers. Bredekamp (1993) also concluded that teachers at NAEYC-accredited schools had higher salaries and were better trained, and were therefore able to provide developmentally appropriate activities that would help children prepare for kindergarten. According to Ackermann and Barnett (2006), the National Institute of Early Education Research recommends lower teacher-to-student ratios and higher qualifications, along with ongoing professional development to help improve the quality of early childhood education. It is important to mention that NAEYC's criteria requires all of the components mentioned above.

NAEYC accreditation is currently the most widely recognized sign of a high-quality program (NAEYC, 2010a), yet nationwide, only about 8% of preschools are accredited by NAEYC. Furthermore, the average early childhood education program in the United States is of poor-to-mediocre quality (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2007; Rimm-Kaufman & Ponitz, 2009; Winter & Kelley, 2008). Despite strong evidence of the benefits of high-quality preschools, most preschools are not accredited and do not seek NAEYC or any other form of accreditation because preschool administrators face serious challenges that discourage them from pursuing NAEYC accreditation. Some of the challenges and factors that have discouraged preschool

administrators from seeking NAEYC accreditation include the need to secure consent from stakeholders for pursue accreditation and the need to secure the necessary funding to start the accreditation process and maintain accreditation.

Securing Consent From Stakeholders to Pursue Accreditation

Before accreditation can even start, preschool directors have to convince stakeholders of NAEYC's importance and benefits and how their program could further benefit from the accreditation. The stakeholders include the governing board of the preschool as well as the program staff. Convincing the program's governing board is challenging, but convincing the program staff can be even more challenging, as program staff would have to work many hours for many months and perhaps even for years on a voluntary basis. For example, the program staff must collect and organize evidence in each of their classroom portfolios to start and maintain the accreditation. In another words, once the classroom portfolios are created, program staff must continue to maintain these classroom portfolios as long as the program is NAEYC accredited. Many teachers from this research site mentioned that they had worked late hours and even on weekends to create their classroom portfolios. Two of the teachers in this program decided to quit before the process even started, because not only did they not want to pursue their degrees, but they also did not want to put in the extra hours to start and maintain accreditation. Dedication of time is a major deterrent for program staff and it becomes an even more challenging issue when most of their time is not compensated.

Preschool directors have the difficult task of convincing stakeholders to pursue NAEYC accreditation, which is difficult mainly because of financial constraints. Furthermore, when a

program is functioning to its fullest capacity, it is even more difficult for the program director to convince the stakeholders to pursue accreditation. Why seek accreditation and spend money if the program is already in high demand? The program director at this research site found it even more difficult to convince the boverning board because the predecing her had already convinced the board that NAEYC accreditation was not important. This contradiction illustrates how important it is for program directors to have a deep knowledge of early childhood education as well as of the process and benefits of NAEYC accreditation. For example, the program director needs to be very familiar with the standards and accreditation process in order to explain and convince the governing board of the importance and benefits of the standards.

Therefore, program directors need to be highly educated and possess the strong verbal and written skills necessary to be able to relay the importance of accreditation to stakeholders. Unfortunately, because of the minimum requirements set for program director qualifications by Title 22 of the California Code of Regulations, most programs attract directors with the minimum qualifications. According to Title 22, directors do not even need an AA degree as long as they have 4 years of preschool teaching experience. Although these challenges seem rather daunting, perhaps one of the most difficult tasks is to secure funding to start and maintain the accreditation.

Securing Funding to Start and Maintain Accreditation

In addition to the basic fees required to enroll in the accreditation process (about $1,450), programs have to consider securing enough funding to hire more qualified teachers, increase the number of teachers to meet the NAEYC teacher-to-student ratio, pay for professional development hours, provide prorated benefits for part-time staff, ensure that the quantity and quality of toys meet NAEYC criteria, and work with third-party professional consultants. Furthermore, NAEYC has recently raised standards for staff qualifications and health and safety (Douglass-Fleiss, 2011). Therefore, the program director for this research site had to send four of her teachers back to school to pursue their undergraduate degrees. Two teachers, with much hesitation, returned to school, whereas the other two decided to resign.

According to Douglass-Fliess (2011), the NAEYC accreditation process is time and resource intensive, as NAEYC has raised its standards for staff qualifications. For example, in the state of California, the Department of Social Services requires a teacher-to-student ratio of 1:12 for preschool children, whereas NAEYC requires a teacher-to-student ratio of 1:9 for preschool teachers. Furthermore, the Department of Social Services mandates that preschool teachers have a minimum of 12 semester college units, whereas for NAEYC, one teacher in each class must have a minimum of an AA degree plus be enrolled in a B.A. program. NAEYC's requirement that prorated benefits be offered to part-time employees is another financial burden (Ritchie, 2005). As one can clearly see, NAEYC's standards require a better teacher-to-student ratio as well as better benefits for preschool staff. These NAEYC requirements would force a program to hire teachers with higher qualifications and therefore to spend more money. Additionally, lower teacher-to-student ratios mean that more teachers would have to be hired.

Convincing the teachers to pursue accreditation was difficult, because not only would teachers have to work extended hours, but also they would have to do so mostly on a voluntary basis. Several teachers mentioned during their interviews that they had worked until midnight on many days, including weekends. Finally, teachers hesitated because some teachers were forced to return to school to pursue their degrees. NAEYC requires that by 2015, at least one teacher per classroom have a minimum of an AA degree or equivalent and be working toward a B.A. degree. This criteria alone is significant because it will force teachers in NAEYC-accredited programs to pursue and finish their degrees as well as to continue with their professional education. Furthermore, programs interested in pursuing NAEYC accreditation would have to hire teachers that already had an AA degree and either dismiss current teachers who did not have an AA degree or demote them from teacher to assistant teacher. Furthermore, NAEYC-accredited programs will continue to raise the quality of their programs nationwide as teachers are required to further their education step-by-step. As it is, the difference in quality level from accredited centers to nonaccredited centers is significant, and the gap would become even larger as NAEYC continues to raise its standards for teacher qualifications.

Not surprisingly, the literature review validated the hypothesis that teachers in NAEYC-accredited programs had higher degrees and were more sensitive toward children (Gerber et al., 2007). Although programs do not have to pay for their teachers' schooling, the program must raise salaries for teachers who possess degrees in order to attract and retain qualified teachers. Additionally, teachers had to attend professional development hours that the school had to pay for, and based on NAEYC criteria 10.E 01, "Personnel policies should provide incentives based on participation in professional development opportunities" (NAEYC, 2005e, p. 23).

The literature review also revealed that teachers benefit from higher salary levels and better quality of work in NAEYC-accredited preschools (Bloom, 1996; McDonald 2009; Whitebook et al., 2004). The conclusions from this study are based on NAEYC criteria such as 10.E.01, which states, "Policies detail salary scales with increments based on professional qualifications, length of employment, and performance evaluation" (NAEYC, 2005e, p. 23). NAEYC health and safety standards also recommend that child care programs work with two consultants: a nutritionist as well as a nurse, to ensure that the school is meeting the latest research-based health and nutrition standards. The nurse reviews the health exclusion policies of the preschool and provides training for the teachers on how to administer medication. The nutritionist reviews the food policy and menu to make sure that the school is serving healthy options with the recommended portions. Additionally, both consultants must visit the program twice a year and fees for their services can easily add up to $1,500 annually. Although this is an emerging criteria, it is expected that programs meet these qualifications. Criteria 5.A.02 of NAEYC reads, "Unless the program participates in the United States Department of Agriculture's Child and Adult Care Food Program, at least two times a year a registered dietician or pediatric public health nutritionist evaluates the menus for nutritional content" (NAEYC, 2005d, p. 15). NAEYC also requires routine cleaning and safety precautions such as fire extinguishers and smoke detectors (NAEYC, 2008). For example, the program had to install fire extinguishers both inside and outside and have them checked by the fire department on a regular basis.

The last funding-related hindrance is to ensure that enough quality educational

toys are in each classroom. For example, Criteria 2.A.08 reads, "Materials and equipment are rich invariety" (NAEYC, 2005b, p. 14). As the program director mentioned, she had to order multicultural toys and posters for each classroom to meet NAEYC Criteria 2.J.01, which states, "Children are provided with varied opportunities to gain an appreciation of cultural diversity" (NAEYC, 2005b, p. 21). Having ample amounts of multicultural toys and posters in the classroom ensured that children were being exposed to diversity as well as feeling validated in the classrooms. Criteria 2.A.08B states, "Materials and equipment used to implement the curriculum reflect the lives of the children & families as well as diversity found in society" (NAEYC, 2005b, p. 14).

Motivating Factors for Pursuing NAEYC Accreditation

Diversity. Bringing in families from low-socioeconomic backgrounds through state-subsidized programs was one of the biggest motivating factors for the program director in terms of seeking NAEYC accreditation. Low-income families were able to join the program because the state was fully subsidizing their tuition. Prior to NAEYC accreditation, full tuition subsidy was not possible. As McDonald (2009) and Sanford-Brown (2010) confirmed, the majority of states were requiring programs to be NAEYC accredited in order to receive full subsidy reimbursements. The program director mentioned that it was very important for the program to include children and families from all walks of life. After receiving NAEYC accreditation, the program was able to enroll 20 families whose tuition was fully subsidized through the state, an achievement that was not possible prior to accreditation.

Being able to enroll children from low-income families is an important factor in this case study, as studies of high-quality early childhood programs (Barnett et al., 2005; Frede & Barnett,

1992; Waldfogel, 2006) demonstrated that such programs are beneficial to all students and may create more opportunities for historically disadvantaged children.

Racial and ethnic diversity was also implemented in the program in myriad ways. For example, because of NAEYC criteria, classrooms had to display a rich array of multicultural toys and posters. Toys and posters had to include children and families with different abilities and disabilities and different ethnic backgrounds. Classrooms celebrated diversity by inviting families to come into the classrooms and share their cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Families would bring posters depicting their cultural and ethnic background and the posters would stay up for a whole month. During this month, children would often learn facts about the different countries, eat ethnic food, and even learn some of the foreign language.

Children must be exposed to different cultures and ethnicities as young as possible. By doing so, children will be able to make connections with one another and reduce the dangerous biases that might otherwise build in them. According to the United States Department of Education (2000), the US population is becoming more ethnically diverse. By 2020, two thirds of the children enrolled in public schools will be African American, Asian, Hispanic, or Native American. Therefore, as the student population becomes more diverse, the big challenge will be to provide academic experiences for children that are culturally sensitive.

Research has shown that as teacher qualification standards for preschool teachers have risen steadily over the years, the number of White teachers has increased and the number of minority teachers decreased (Bracken & Crawford, 2010). Therefore, having a diverse team of staff is as important as having a program full of diverse families. The research site had a diverse background of teachers, as this is also a criteria required by NAEYC. Additionally,

families that consisted of same-sex partners were now being accepted as well. The director of the program made a case to the faith-based governing board by referring to NAEYC criteria that all children should be welcomed in the program.

Marketing strategy. Although the program was functioning to its fullest capacity even before pursuing NAEYC accreditation, they further benefited from advertising their preschool through a national marketing program (the NAEYC-accredited program search on the NAEYC website). Programs that are accredited are able to advertise their preschool on this national website, where parents from all around the country are able to view the program.

What Changes Did Administrators, Teachers, and Parents Believe NAEYC Accreditation Brought to Their Preschool?

NAEYC accreditation sets the standards high for early childhood program quality based on research of early childhood development; whereas state childcare licensing regulations set the minimum level of quality to protect the children in state-licensed centers (McDonald, 2009). Furthermore, early childhood education teacher training and curricula are not standardized or enforced from state to state and public to private. Therefore, quality and content of curriculum vary widely across thousands of public and private early childhood education centers and preschools.

Unified curriculum and research-based assessment for children. The stakeholders of the preschool were very pleased about the positive changes that NAEYC accreditation helped bring into their program. One of the biggest changes that both parents and teachers noticed was the unified curriculum and children's assessments implemented after accreditation. Having a unified curriculum that emphasized teaching via developmentally appropriate techniques, as

well as a research-based assessment methods to measure children's developmental progress, is one of the key factors of having a quality program. Criteria 4.B.02 from the NAEYC standards states, "Assessments obtain information on all areas of children's development and learning, including cognitive skills, language, social and emotional development, approaches to learning, health and physical development" (NAEYC, 2005a, p. 16).

Children's progress in social/emotional, cognitive, language, and physical development was being monitored in various ways. All children at the research site had a portfolio that included samples of their art and written work, pictures of their play that depicted learning milestones, anecdotal notes of their daily activities, as well as their assessments. For example, one child's language development was monitored from the toddler classroom to the preschool classroom. Her portfolio was about three inches thick, as the child had been monitored since the toddler classroom. The portfolio contained writing samples starting from when the child was just 2 years old and could only scribble; the writing samples showed continual progress as the child went from scribbling to writing individual letters to finally writing her complete name. The portfolio also contained the ASQ questionnaire as well as pictures and anecdotal notes.

The current curriculum at the research site is built on Vygotsky's socio-constructivist theory of child development and developmentally appropriate practices. As Vygotsky (1978) emphasized, the preschool curriculum guides the teachers to implement developmentally appropriate activities through which children explore and experiment individually, in groups as well as with the aid of their teachers. Therefore, developmentally appropriate practices were implemented into NAEYC accreditation standards (NAEYC, 2010d). Vygotsky also emphasized the importance of the role of adult–child learning especially by engaging children in

a developmentally appropriate way (1978). This would mean that teachers are well trained and qualified above and beyond the minimum qualifications of what Title 22 requires. Barnett (2011) confirmed that teacher training coupled with developmentally appropriate teaching methods is the most critical factor in having a quality program. For example, the teachers at this research site not only had their AA degrees, but they also had special training on how to teach via developmentally appropriate techniques. One teacher explained that having a degree is helpful but one also needs to be trained on how to teach with the appropriate techniques. For example, a child is capable of learning how to subtract and add at preschool age. However, the developmentally appropriate way of teaching would be the hands-on approach, such as showing the child three apples, asking the child to count, then take one apple away and ask the child how many apples are left. This way of teaching would qualify as developmentally appropriate. However, in programs where teachers do not have the proper training or degree, they would resort to improper ways of teaching, such as using the paper and pencil method.

Qualified teachers. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (2012), there are currently no universally recognized regulations that set minimum standards for teacher qualifications. Instead it is left to each state to set their own standards**.** That no college degree is required for preschool teachers has resulted in a nationwide number of preschool teachers possessing only the minimum requirements. For example, the minimum standards set by Title 22 in the state of California require students to take just 12 semester unit college classes to become teachers (California Department of Social Services, 2007b).

Research has clearly documented that the first 5 years of a child's life are imperative for healthy development of social/emotional, cognitive, and physical development (Barnett, 1988;

Bloom & Bella, 2005; Magnuson et al., 2007). Furthermore, research has shown that quality preschool experiences improve children's later school performance (Abadiano & Turner, 2005; Barnett et al., 2007; Bartik, 2006; Gormley, 2007; Karoly, 2009; Schweinhart et al., 1993; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Additionally, Ramey and Ramey (2004) stated that thousands of children enter kindergarten with delays in language and academic skills, and evidence supports the fact that quality preschool education can help close the achievement gap (Abadiano & Turner, 2005). Given this crucial research, the federal government or individual states have neglected to raise the minimum qualifications for preschool teachers, leaving children at the most vulnerable time of their lives with teachers who are the least qualified.

Studies have confirmed a strong correlation between student achievement and teacher education and training (Karoly, 2009; Schweinhart et al., 1993). Teachers at this research site for the most part had their AA degrees, with the exception of 4 out of the 12 teachers. Accreditation had forced the four teachers to pursue an AA degree, and parents noticed that the program director was only hiring teachers with degrees. Although two of the four teachers who had to return to school for a degree were unhappy with the pursuit of NAEYC accreditation and ended up quitting their jobs, the rest of the teachers unanimously agreed that as they worked through the accreditation process, their bonds grew stronger. Each teacher in every classroom is mandated to put together a classroom portfolio. The preschool classroom portfolio consists of over 215 criteria. Teachers must show evidence for each criteria. Some evidence of criteria comes in forms of lesson plans, photographs of children depicting what they are learning, examples of assessment plans, and anecdotal notes. For example, Criteria 3.F.05 states, "Teaching staff support the development and maintenance of children's home language

whenever possible" (NAEYC, 2005g, p. 18). Some teachers were quick to come up with evidence, such as showing a child reading a book in their native language. Other teachers struggled to show evidence of how they supported this criteria and had to turn to co-teachers for advice. The director of the program felt that this experience provided plenty of time for teachers to get to know one another as they helped and confided in one another.

Teachers expressed that they felt validated as they read each criteria for the 10 different standards. Teachers felt empowered when they came across criteria that described exactly what their teaching methods entailed. For example, many teachers mentioned that they knelt down on the children's level before they communicated with children, as this was an NAEYC criteria. Furthermore, teachers reflected that their practices could be more justifiable with parents because they had accreditation to back it up. Criteria 3.F.02 reads, "Play is planned for each day" (NAEYC, 2005g, p. 18). In response to parents who pushed teachers to get their children ready academically and further questioned why children should "just" play, teachers referenced this criteria and explained how play helps children learn and develop. During one of the observations in the infant classroom, a tour was taking place. When a prospective parent asked how closely the infants were supervised, the director stated that because they were NAEYC accredited, they were mandated to supervise infants by sight at all times, whereas the Department of Social Services permitted short intervals of supervision by sound for infants. As Apple (2006) confirmed in the literature review, unlike licensing regulations, which provide the minimum standards, NAEYC accreditation provides criteria that raises the quality. Two longitudinal studies in the state of California confirmed that NAEYC-accredited programs had higher overall program quality, lower staff turnover,

better trained staff, and provided more developmentally appropriate activities (Jorde Bloom, 1996).

Stricter health and safety regulations. Research shows that 60% of children in the United States who are under the age of 6 are cared for outside of the family home, such as in a preschool or a day care (Mulligan et al., 2005; Schumacher et al., 2006), and unfortunately, the average early childhood education program in the United States is of poor-to-mediocre quality (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2007; Rimm-Kaufman & Ponitz, 2009; Winter & Kelley, 2008), which leaves room for accidents due to lack of supervision and minimum standards set by each state.

In response to the overwhelming day care injury statistics, a large study was conducted by the US Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), which identified potential safety hazards in 220 licensed child care settings across the country. A total of eight areas were investigated for potential safety hazards: cribs, soft bedding, playground surfacing, playground surfacing maintenance, child safety gates, window blind cords, drawstrings in children's clothing, and recalled children's products. A total of four types of licensed child care settings were visited: federal child care centers, nonprofit centers, in-home settings, and for-profit centers. The findings concluded that two thirds of the child care settings exhibited at least one of the safety hazards identified in this study. Annually, about 31,000 children under age 4 are treated in US hospital emergency rooms for injuries at child care settings and, unfortunately, since 1990, at least 56 children have died (Koeppe, 2010).

Research in the literature review also concluded that programs that are NAEYC accredited provide safety precautions to ensure children’s safety (NAEYC, 2008). NAEYC

accreditation helped bring stricter health and safety regulations for programs and therefore increased the quality of the programs.

In this case study, the medication administration policy was updated to reflect current changes whereby both parental and physician consent are required for the administration of nonprescription medication; prior to NAEYC accreditation, only parental consent was necessary. Furthermore, the supervision policy in the infant and toddler classroom now required supervision by sight at all times; previously, supervision by sound was sometimes permissible.

It was evident through observations and program portfolios that the research site took precautionary measures to ensure the safety of all children. More than 48 criteria are even further broken down into subcategories in the NAEYC accreditation standards for indoor and outdoor safety. The program installed a canopy to help protect children from the UV rays of the sun as required by Criteria 9.B.06 (NAEYC, 2005f, p. 17). Fire extinguishers are present in each preschool classroom and are inspected on an annual basis as required by Criteria 9.C.11 (NAEYC, 2005f, p. 19). As the results of the study conducted by the CPSC (Koeppe, 2010) show, poor maintenance of the playground is one of the biggest safety hazards for children. The site supervisor of the program does a walk through every morning and looks for any broken toys or dangerous objects such as broken glass or untaped rugs that might cause children or adults to trip, as required by Criteria 9.C.08 (NAEYC, 2005f, p. 18). She also checks the weather on a daily basis to make sure that it is safe for children to play outdoors, as Criteria 9.D.03 states that "program staff protect children and adults from exposure to high levels of pollution from smog or heavy traffic by limiting outdoor and physical activity as a precaution during smog or other air pollution alerts" (NAEYC, 2005f, p. 20).

How Do Administrators', Teachers', and Parents' Perceptions and Evaluations of the Preschool Change Following NAEYC Accreditation?

Once NAEYC accreditation had been achieved, perceptions of the stakeholders changed regarding the accreditation process. Teachers felt that the lengthy and arduous accreditation process was worth it, because not only did they receive validation that their teaching methods were in line with NAEYC criteria, but also their program received the stamp of quality. While gathering evidence for criteria, teachers found that most of their past teaching methods and practices reflected the required criteria. Many teachers mentioned that accreditation proved they were operating a high-caliber quality program. Additionally, accreditation meant they belonged to a small elite group of programs nationwide.

Perhaps the strongest point of view came from the program director, who said that she believed accreditation helped raise awareness about the importance and significance of early childhood education. This was an easy task, as program director was able to explain that accreditation criteria were research based and developed in conjunction with nine Technical Resource Teams of educators, administrators, and researchers from all around the country. This process was informed by the input and feedback of thousands of individuals, a review of the empirical literature, and the findings of research from the University of California, Los Angeles (NAEYC, 2010c).

NAEYC (2005c) stated the following:

> But the changes will make NAEYC accreditation an even stronger mark of quality in early childhood education; they will help draw more families, employers, and others to NAEYC accredited programs. Just as important, the accreditation system and the example set by NAEYC accredited program will help educators, families, and many others in our communities recognize the value of setting high standards for all programs for young children. (p. 7)

The program director used accreditation criteria to prove many points to the governing board about the importance of preschool and the implications it can have. One of the points was the importance of seeking and achieving NAEYC accreditation because it would help the program improve its overall quality. The program director chose a number of criteria to present to the governing board that would help the program reach a higher caliber of quality upon achieving accreditation. For example, teacher qualifications needed to be improved, the school needed to become more diverse, and more classroom and outdoor materials were necessary. The program director also pointed out that achieving accreditation would help place the school at the same caliber level as the small number of elite schools.

The program director helped convince the board that some teachers, based on NAEYC criteria, would have to pursue their degrees as well as attend professional development hours. She explained to the governing board that the higher the teacher qualifications were, the better teachers would teach. The program director's opinion correlates with studies that have confirmed strong correlations between student achievement and teacher education and training (Karoly, 2009; Schweinhart et al., 1993). The director pointed out that 4 out of the 12 teachers were teaching based on a few units and could certainly become better teachers with more training. Additionally, all teachers would have to attend professional development hours to be kept abreast of the latest research-based practices.

The program director also explained that the program was lacking diversity in the form of families from low-socioeconomic backgrounds, families consisting of same-sex couples, as well as lacking educational materials that would help children identify with their cultural backgrounds and expose them to people with different abilities and disabilities. The program

director convinced the board that this was crucial because their program was based in Los Angeles, a city of great diversity. Their program needed to reflect the practices of the neighborhood in which they worked. Finally, the program was already practicing most required NAEYC criteria and becoming NAEYC accredited would provide that stamp of quality for prospective parents. The program director, having had prior experience with accreditation, its process, and its benefits, and therefore being aware of the implications of accreditation, used some of the accreditation criteria mentioned previously to help convince the governing board to seek accreditation. As the criteria were research based, it was much easier for her to convince the board of the legitimacy of the criteria. The program director felt strongly that it would be very easy for other program directors to use accreditation standards to help explain the significance of the criteria. As elementary schools in Los Angeles have become so competitive in terms of academic readiness and play is starting to disappear in some preschools, Criteria 3.F.02 “play is planned for each day” (NAEYC, 2005g, p. 18) can be used to illustrate and raise awareness of the importance of play.

Implications of this Study

Implications for Preschools that are Considering the Pursuit of NAEYC Accreditation

The conclusions from this case study have significant implications for program stakeholders who are debating whether to pursue NAEYC accreditation. Research from the literature review as well as from this study clearly reveals that NAEYC accreditation can help elevate the quality of a program (Bloom, 1996; Gerber et al., 2007; McDonald, 2009; Whitebook et al., 2004). Furthermore, as the research site was functioning to its fullest capacity with a waiting list, many improvements (e.g., health and safety policies, curriculum and assessments) were still made because of NAEYC accreditation. This response means that even programs that are functioning to their fullest capacity with waiting lists have room to improve; it also illuminates the fact that there are major challenges for program directors to face before as well as during the accreditation process.

The strongest form of evidence comes not from the literature review but from this case study, as prospective teachers and program directors will directly relate to the stories told by the participants of this study about the process of accreditation, the challenges, and how accreditation helped improve quality of the program. This case study provides distinct examples of the challenges program directors and teachers will face as they decide whether to pursue accreditation as well as during the accreditation process itself. Furthermore, this study provides insight into what tools prospective program directors can use to help convince their stakeholders to pursue accreditation. Results from this study also illustrate the benefits and value that accreditation can help to a program.

Perhaps the most significant implication of this study is that other programs seeking NAEYC accreditation would be inspired to do so by utilizing the tools and techniques employed by the program director to convince interested yet indecisive program staff and stakeholders to embark on the accreditation process. These tools can and should be used by novice program directors to help ease the challenging part of the accreditation process, which is attempting to convince everyone involved of the importance and benefits of accreditation as well as implementing NAEYC criteria before even starting the process. Implementing some or most of the NAEYC criteria before actually starting the process will help the program staff build confidence and faith in the accreditation process, as well as empower them with the knowledge that their teaching methods are in line with current research.

Implications of this Research for Leadership for Social Justice

The program director of the research site had all the necessary tools to convince the stakeholders to seek and achieve NAEYC accreditation. By doing so, the site improved its quality in many areas, such as diversity, teaching, curriculum and assessment, marketing, and health and safety regulations. The program staff has also become much closer from working collaboratively during the arduous and lengthy NAEYC accreditation process. Even though it was already functioning to its fullest capacity and was known to be a quality program, the program still had much room for improvement. Furthermore, now that they have achieved NAEYC accreditation, the program can place itself among the few nationally accredited programs.

The teachers of the program have become empowered not only because they are pursuing their education—whether in the form of a degree or of professional development

hours—but also because their practices are validated by criteria developed by early childhood education specialists through scholarly research. NAEYC accreditation has given the teachers and program director the power to explain the importance of early childhood education and the reasons why and how they practice. Furthermore, the research site can serve as a model school for other programs desiring to achieve NAEYC accreditation. Perhaps NAEYC can provide small stipends for experienced NAEYC-accredited program directors to mentor other interested directors seeking accreditation.

Additionally, this research has demonstrated that a highly qualified program leader can help alleviate issues related to social inequalities. For example, the program director at this research site pursued NAEYC accreditation knowing that accreditation would help bring a slice of diversity to her program. Achieving NAEYC accreditation meant that children from low-income families would be able to attend a quality preschool. Quality program leaders can make a huge impact on children's lives as well as their families.

Recommendations

For the Site

The research site has a dynamic leader who possesses strong communication skills and in-depth knowledge of early childhood education. Furthermore, the leader of this research site is passionate about the field of early childhood education and is an advocate not only for children and their families, but also for her staff. The program director further possesses strong interpersonal skills. Her staff and parents respect, admire, and look up to her. In turn, she uses her skills to help every child reach his or her fullest potential.

The teachers at this site seem passionate, energetic, and dedicated to their careers. Parents are happy with the quality of care their children are receiving and have nothing but positive comments. Children were happy, learning, and being nurtured in positive and gentle ways. The program functions to its fullest capacity and clearly at a high-quality caliber. In conclusion, this program serves as a model program for private and public preschools.

Therefore, it is my recommendation that the program director make herself available as a mentor to other program directors considering going through the NAEYC accreditation process. The accreditation process can seem intimidating and even unreachable for the unseasoned director and the guidance of a skilled and experienced director could possibly make the difference in terms of pursuing or not pursuing NAEYC accreditation. The program director could mentor interested program directors in implementing changes that meet NAEYC criteria well before NAEYC process starts. This support would ensure that the process flows smoothly and that teachers would not feel overwhelmed and intimidated or harbor resentment toward the program director.

Finally, in theme 1, it was discovered that many prospective and current parents expressed increasing concerns about their children's readiness for kindergarten. Most parents felt that teaching via developmentally appropriate practices did not always prepare children academically for the competitive kindergarten. Therefore, throughout the course of the year, the director and teachers felt pressured by parents to expose children to certain academic skills that were inappropriate due to children's developmental stage. To alleviate the pressure from parents, the program director should make a presentation during the mandatory orientation about the importance of teaching via developmentally appropriate practice. Inviting other child

development experts to speak on this topic with parents will also help alleviate parent concerns and unrealistic expectations.

For the Field

The field of early childhood education has come a long way from home-based child care to programs that foster academic, social/emotional, and physical development. In the United States, preschool policies are set at local, state, and federal levels. Currently, there are no universal policies or regulations governing the minimum training and education required for preschool teachers. Furthermore, aside from NAEYC standards, there are no other national standards for the field of early childhood education. Standards set by each state reflect the minimum requirements, which are not enough to attract and retain qualified teachers who can help make a difference in children's lives.

Despite strong empirical evidence of the value of high-quality preschool experiences, the average early childhood program in the United States is considered to be poor-to-mediocre in quality (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2007; Rimm-Kaufman & Ponitz, 2009; Winter & Kelley, 2008). Each state must raise its minimum standards to elevate the field of early childhood education—implementation of NAEYC accreditation can help.

Additionally, the NAEYC accreditation process needs to be introduced and taught during college-level courses so that more teachers will know about NAEYC accreditation and understand its benefits and value. Currently, no college course has covered NAEYC accreditation, so it is left up to each individual professor to introduce the topic. NAEYC might be a national organization, but attention is not often paid to this organization, and the benefits of accreditation are seldom promoted.

For NAEYC

The NAEYC welcoming book for starting the accreditation process states, "We will not kid you. The NAEYC study and accreditation process is challenging. It takes time and effort, and at times, it may seem overwhelming" (2005c, p. 7). This message was certainly confirmed as true by every teacher who participated in this study. The program director herself stated that the process is long and arduous, and the verbiage used is challenging for the typical teacher and even the director to understand. Because the accreditation process is so challenging and overwhelming, even program directors who understand the importance and significance of gaining accreditation need guidance from a peer who has undergone the process. NAEYC needs to provide better support to program directors in general to help them understand and realize the importance and benefits of NAEYC accreditation.

Once the program becomes NAEYC accredited, it is left to the individual program director's discretion to ensure that program staff maintain and adhere to the NAEYC criteria. The time between NAEYC achievement and the time of reaccreditation is a lapse of 5 years, which is a long time for the program to maintain adherence to NAEYC criteria without a third party checking. Although NAEYC can stop in and inspect the preschools unannounced, they almost never show up unless there is a complaint. This is a circumstance that has been experienced at the researcher's work site as well as at the research site of this study.

Furthermore, if NAEYC desires that more preschools seek and achieve NAEYC accreditation, the organization must make more funding available to preschools to defray the cost of the fees charged for the steps of NAEYC accreditation. The minimum fee to advance through the NAEYC accreditation process is $1,425, which increases based on the number of

children enrolled in the program. NAEYC offers a limited number of scholarships to cover fees for the accreditation process for programs in need; however, these fees are a small percentage of what the program will ultimately have to spend (Ritchie, 2005). Currently, many programs find it difficult to deal with the financial burden of hiring more teachers and more highly qualified teachers, providing professional development, and purchasing additional toys and materials. In light of these circumstances, paying an additional $1,425 would be a challenge.

Future Research

By studying the factors that prevented or shaped the decision to pursue NAEYC accreditation, this research helped illuminate why so few preschools in the United States are NAEYC accredited. Research on this topic is very limited and more research needs to be conducted. Although a qualitative case study provides depth and insight in ways that a quantitative research cannot, it would be beneficial to conduct a large quantitative study on what factors inhibit or influence the decision by preschool administrators, teachers, and parents to seek NAEYC accreditation.

Additionally, it would be beneficial to conduct a quantitative study of NAEYC-accredited programs to see what recommendations program directors might have regarding the accreditation process. Whereas a case study provides an in-depth understanding of one program's beliefs and perceptions of the accreditation process, more program teachers' and administrators' perceptions and recommendations would help illuminate the lack of NAEYC-accredited programs.

Finally, future research can be conducted with in-depth surveys of parents about their perceptions of how their home's cultural values and norms are being honored at NAEYC accredited programs. For young children to develop and learn optimally, the early childhood professional must be prepared to meet their diverse developmental, cultural, linguistic, and educational needs. Since continuity between home and the early childhood setting supports children's social, emotional, cognitive, and language development, NAEYC places emphasizes that early childhood programs are responsible for creating a welcoming environment that respects diversity, supports children's ties to their families and community, and promotes language acquisition and preservation of children's home languages and cultural identities. This study can perhaps be repeated with programs that are not NAEYC accredited in hopes of capturing whether NAEYC accredited programs are valuing children's culture and diversity more than non accredited programs.

Conclusion

Six facts emerged from this study. First, providing children with high-quality preschool programs decreases academic problems later (Barnett, 1988; Bloom & Bella, 2005, Magnuson et al., 2007). Second, every year, thousands of children enter public kindergartens with delays in language and academic skills (Ramey & Ramey, 2004). Furthermore, children who enter school without being ready remain delayed in later grades and high school (Kainz & Vernon-Feagans, 2007). Third, achievement gaps persist for all children, but particularly for children of minority families (Cadelle et al., 2011). Fourth, myriad research sources prove that quality preschool experiences improve children's later school performance (Abadiano & Turner, 2005;

Barnett et al., 2007; Bartik, 2006; Gormley, 2007; Karoly, 2009; Schweinhart at al., 1993; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Fifth, the average early childhood education program in the United States is of poor-to-mediocre quality (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2007; Rimm-Kaufman & Ponitz, 2009; Winter & Kelley, 2008). And, finally, research has proven that NAEYC-accredited preschools elevate the quality of preschools (Bowman et al., 2001; Cryer, 2003; Helburn, 1995; Jorde Bloom, 1996; Lombardi, 2003; Whitebook et al., 1997). Furthermore, because teacher qualifications are steadily increasing at NAEYC-accredited centers, an even wider gap of quality will grow between accredited and nonaccredited programs.

Early childhood education is the most fundamental foundation for children's lifelong success. Yet, curriculum and teacher qualifications are left up to each state, which in turn set the minimum standards. The quality of preschool programs therefore lies in the hands of the program directors who are often undereducated and inexperienced. The minimum educational requirement for preschool directors consists of some college-level classes, and teachers in most preschools have only the minimum requirement set by Title 22, which is 12 semester class units. It is important to note that high teacher qualifications are almost always present in high-quality preschool programs (Karoly, 2009). This combination of undereducated program directors and teachers yields programs of low-to-mediocre quality. To improve the quality of preschool programs, Title 22 regulations set by the Department of Social Services need to raise their standards to meet NAEYC criteria, or indeed all preschools in the United States should be required to seek and achieve NAEYC accreditation in addition to being licensed. As Abadiano

and Turner (2005) suggested, if we are ever to close the achievement gap, we must have all children who enter kindergarten be ready socially, emotionally, and cognitively.

All children worldwide deserve the right start: a quality preschool education that will prepare them socially/emotionally, physically, and academically for elementary school. Preschools, whether private or public, need the financial support of the state and federal governments to help them elevate their quality by pursuing and attaining NAEYC accreditation.Therefore, our government needs to take a bigger role in instituting policies and providing subsidies. On February 12, 2013, during the State of the Union Address, the President proposed a new federal-state partnership, which would provide all low children with high-quality preschool, as well as expand these programs to children from middle class families. This proposal would help close America's school achievement gap and ensure that all children have the chance to enter kindergarten ready for success. President Obama stated,

> In states that make it a priority to educate our youngest children…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.

The abundant evidence about the importance of NAEYC accreditation on elevating quality of preschools is clear. It is now time to see if we, collectively as a nation have the will to do what it takes to provide all children with the right start.

Appendix A

DIRECTOR/SITE SUPERVISOR INTERVIEW

1. Please tell me about how you believe children learn and develop at a preschool age.
2. Please tell me which curriculum your staff utilizes, how long this curriculum has been implemented at your program and why this particular curriculum was chosen to be implemented.
3. Please tell me how curriculum can affect the quality of preschool?
4. What other factors affect the quality of preschools?
5. Please tell me about when and how you first heard about NAEYC accreditation?
6. When and why did you first decide to pursue NAEYC accreditation?
7. What factors made you decide to pursue accreditation?
8. What factors hindered you from pursuing NAEYC accreditation in the past?
9. How did you discuss with staff the decision to pursue NAEYC accreditation?
10. Describe what your staff understood about NAEYC accreditation and what you explained?
11. How did your staff react and respond to the decision to pursue accreditation?
12. How did you consult with the parents in sharing information about the accreditation?
13. How did parents react?
14. How did parent reactions contribute to pursuing NAEYC accreditation?
15. What do you think the advantages are to achieving NAEYC accreditation?
16. What do you think the disadvantages are to pursuing NAEYC accreditation?
17. Describe your experience and process of self-study and accreditation.

18. What aspects of the self-study did you find most challenging?
19. What would you change about the NAEYC accreditation process and why?
20. What criteria would you add or take away from the NAEYC accreditation and why?
21. Why do you think more preschools are not seeking NAEYC accreditation?
22. What would you tell other directors who might be considering undergoing NAEYC self- study and accreditation?
23. Now that the NAEYC accreditation process has been successfully accomplished, what has changed at your center and with your preschool programs? How do you view the current preschool environment for children, compared to how it was before self-study and accreditation?
24. Please tell me reasons why you would consider reaccrediting or not reaccrediting through NAEYC after your term expires?

Appendix B

TEACHER INTERVIEW

1. Please tell me how you think children develop and learn at a preschool age?
2. What curriculum do you implement in your classroom and why?
3. Which curriculum do you believe best benefits preschool children and why?
4. How does curriculum affect the quality of preschool?
5. What other factors affect the quality of preschool and why?
6. Please tell me about when and how you first heard about NAEYC accreditation?
7. How did you participate in the decision to pursue NAEYC accreditation?
8. How did you participate in the self-study process?
9. How would you describe the self-study process?
10. What was the most challenging part of the accreditation process?
11. What would have made it easier?
12. Did any factors make your think you would not be able to meet the NAEYC standards?
13. How did it affect you with regard to your own training and learning requirements?
14. How did the administrator discuss the quality improvement and self-study with you?
15. How did you react and respond to the decision to pursue accreditation?
16. Did you consult with the parents during the self-study and accreditation process?
17. How did the parents react?
18. What do you think the advantages are to achieving NAEYC accreditation?
19. Describe your experience and process of self-study and accreditation.

20. What would you tell other teachers who might be at a center considering NAEYC self-study and accreditation?
21. Now that the NAEYC accreditation process has been accomplished, what has changed at your center and with your classroom?
22. If you could, what would you change about the NAEYC accreditation process, standards and criteria and why?
23. In what ways did NAEYC accreditation improve the quality of your classroom and the way you teach?

Appendix C

PARENT INTERVIEW

1. Please tell me how you think preschool is important for your child's development.
2. How many preschools did you visit prior to making your decision about enrolling your child at this center?
3. What factors helped you decide to enroll your child at this center?
4. How would you define a quality preschool.
5. What kind of a curriculum were you looking for and why?
6. Please tell me about when and how you first heard about NAEYC accreditation?
7. Is it important to you that your child's preschool center is NAEYC accredited?
8. Tell us about when you first learned about the accreditation process? (Was your child already enrolled? Did you attend a meeting about NAEYC? What was your opinion at the time?)
9. What was your experience with the self-study process?
10. Were you, as a parent, consulted about changes being considered at the preschool?
11. Were your cultural beliefs taken into account by the preschool program?
12. Now that NAEYC accreditation has been achieved, what is your impression about the quality of the program?
13. What message would you have for parents who are considering enrolling a child in preschool? Would you recommend that they look only at NAEYC-accredited centers?

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