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"When Do We Play?": Administrator, Teacher, and Parent Perceptions of Play in a Catholic Kindergarten Classroom

Aimée Eva Ramirez
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LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

"When Do We Play?":
Administrator, Teacher, and Parent Perceptions of Play in a Catholic Kindergarten Classroom

by

Aimée Eva Ramirez

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

2017

"When Do We Play?":

Administrator, Teacher, and Parent Perceptions of Play

in a Catholic Kindergarten Classroom

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This dissertation written by Aimee Ramirez, under the direction of the Dissertation Committee, is approved and accepted by all committee members, in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.

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lonely on those late, late nights, I felt her presence with me, and I was able to persevere. This work is dedicated to you all because it has been ours from the beginning.

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Administrator, Teacher, and Parent Perceptions of Play

in a Catholic Kindergarten Classroom

by

Aimee Ramirez

Educational reforms have created a climate of accountability and high academic pressure that has resulted in a pushing down of the curriculum into early childhood education. Once a prominent pedagogical feature, play is disappearing from kindergarten. The following is a doctoral dissertation that studied administrator, teacher, and parent perceptions of play and its role within the kindergarten curriculum at a Catholic elementary school in the Los Angeles Archdiocese. Using a qualitative case study method, the study noted how play was utilized in transitional kindergarten and traditional kindergarten classrooms at the school site. Interviews, classroom observations, and document review of school publications contributed to the following findings: play was used as a reward for classroom management, adults did not commonly see the connection between play and learning, and academic achievement was valued over play. These findings were placed in the larger context of kindergarten, play, and curriculum by using a theoretical framework built on Early Child Education theories and Epstein's (2011) Parental

Involvement framework. This case study highlighted factors that influenced curriculum design and implementation in kindergarten. It contributes to the effort to inform parents, teachers, administrators, and policy makers of the importance of defending play within kindergarten in light of social pressures that favor a didactic kindergarten setting.

PROLOGUE

I have been a kindergarten teacher in a Catholic school for the last five years. My personal journey in this time has allowed me to discover the richness of early childhood education. Through observation, reflection, and listening to my students, I have worked at developing curriculum and pedagogy that integrates developmentally appropriate practices into daily classroom activities. My students, and what I see as my responsibility to create a positive, memorable kindergarten experience for them, have significantly influenced my decision to investigate perceptions of play.

Personally, I have experienced many of the same challenges in the kindergarten curriculum that are presented in the literature for this study; namely, the tension between reaching academic benchmarks and maintaining developmentally appropriate practices. However, my particular vantage point as a practitioner and researcher helped me complete this study with care, compassion, and commitment to the communities I had the privilege to work with.

As a fellow kindergarten teacher, I was able to create a deep rapport with the teachers at the school site I studied. Additionally, my experience as a product of K–12 Catholic education in the Los Angeles archdiocese also helped me appreciate and investigate the relationships, perspectives, and experiences of parents who participated in the study. My personal history also afforded me a special understanding of the student experience—and, now, teacher experience—of being in a Catholic school environment, and I believe this has contributed to my deep engagement with the issues presented in the study.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Across its history—from the 1840s, when Fredrich Froebel opened the first kindergarten in Germany to today's classrooms—kindergarten has changed dramatically. Once a space and place that proportionally nurtured children's socioemotional, cognitive, and physical development, kindergarten in the United States has shifted to favor academics; emphasizing literacy, math, and, in some cases, achievement testing. This change came in the wake of educational reforms stemming from the report *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) and was intensified by policies such as the federal 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and, most recently, the Common Core State Standards reform. These reforms, based in neoliberal ideology, have created a strong sense of urgency among administrators, teachers, and parents to increase academic expectations for students earlier in their school careers (Leyva, 2009; Tienken, 2013; Torres, 2005). As a result, children in kindergarten have been dramatically limited in the time they are allowed to engage in unstructured, open-ended, child-directed free play (Miller & Almon, 2009).

Kindergarten has witnessed: a "pushing down" of the curriculum, an increase in didactic instruction, and, overall, a diminished pedagogical preference for student-driven exploration (Chervenak, 2011; Miller & Almon, 2009; Nicolopoulou, 2010; Patte, 2010; Schroeder, 2007; Vecchiotti, 2001). The widespread, if controversial, adoption of the Common Core Standards does offer kindergarten teachers guidance in using play as a research-based best practice. However, research demonstrates that play within the kindergarten classroom is often limited to teacher-led opportunities for students (Ranz-Smith, 2007).

Compared to those in Froebel's kindergarten, current students are allowed relatively little time to play (Medellin, 2015; Miller & Almon, 2009). Even as play is being squeezed out, research continues to present more evidence for the numerous benefits play has on healthy child development (Ginsburg et al., 2007). As a result, there is growing tension between incorporating play while meeting academic benchmarks and expectations for today's kindergarten students (Cheng, 2012; Clarke, 2014; Editorial Projects in Education Research, 2013; Hipsher, 2014; Medellin, 2015; Riley, 2012; Wan, 2014).

Adding to this tension is the current international focus on play, most notably as it features in Finland's educational system and stands in stark contrast to American practices. A number of recent popular magazine and newspaper articles: "The Joyful, Illiterate Kindergarteners of Finland" (Walker, 2015), "No Grammar Schools, Lots of Play" (Butler, 2016), and "Let the Children Play: The Secret to Finnish Education" (Wayman, 2016) capture Finland's belief in the importance of play to early childhood education. These pedagogies have continued to result in Finnish students achieving top scores on the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) as well as on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Wayman, 2016).

Given these pressures and tensions between pushing academics and finding time for play, it is important to understand what adults with strong ties to kindergarten think about play and its role in the kindergarten curriculum. Epstein (2011) argued that teachers, administrators, and parents play a critical role in shaping a child's educational experience. These adults have the ability to directly impact school policies, curriculum implementation, and a child's daily learning experience.

No Child Left Behind and its Impact on American Education

No Child Left Behind (2001), an iteration of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965), sought to address achievement differentials evident among children across racial and socioeconomic levels (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). In announcing this reform, President George W. Bush said that American children were being "left behind" with regard to the knowledge and skills they should receive from a public school education. Bush emphasized that, in comparison to their global counterparts, American children were underprepared and underperforming particularly in math and literacy (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). No Child Left Behind was adopted as a means to raise the standards of both teaching and learning in modern America. It aimed to do this by focusing on the following priorities: establishing high academic standards for all students, designing rigorous tests to measure student achievement, and creating accountability systems for teachers and districts (Leyva, 2009).

Under No Child Left Behind, schools had to prove they were making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) with each subgroup of their student population, disaggregated by race, gender, English language proficiency, disability, and socioeconomic status (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Consequences for not demonstrating AYP after one or more years included being labeled a "failing school," a decrease in federal funding, being subject to "corrective action" such as restructuring, and the option for parents to use Title I funds to transfer their child to a higher-performing public or private school (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Given its emphasis on annual testing for students in grades three through eight, No Child Left Behind in effect narrowed the curriculum as teachers began to teach to the test and focus instruction to

testable subjects. Among educators, students, and parents, No Child Left Behind was widely regarded as being the source of high stress and anxiety (Leyva, 2009; Tienken, 2013).

For kindergarten, No Child Left Behind intensified a movement away from developmentally appropriate pedagogy. As teachers and administrators prioritized early literacy and math, less time was designated for traditional kindergarten activities, such as blocks, dramatic play, and child-directed exploration. Testing pressure also resulted in many schools limiting arts, music, games, manipulative materials, and play in favor of teacher-led didactic instruction or test prep (Miller & Almon, 2009). Within the American curriculum, a holistic approach to early education became less desirable and school programs that highlighted early literacy and numeracy flourished (Brewer, Gasko, & Miller, 2011; Bryant & Clifford, 1992; Curwood, 2007).

Statement of the Problem

The publication of *A Nation at Risk* (1983) served as a tipping point for educational reforms that intensified the shift to a testing and accountability culture in American education. From this reform, didactic instruction and teacher-centered pedagogy became the preferred means of achieving academic success (Chervenak, 2011; Miller & Almon, 2009; Medellin, 2015; Nicolopoulou, 2010; Patte, 2010; Schroeder, 2007; Vecchiotti, 2001). When coupled with other social pressures to prepare children for a highly selective college admission process, the kindergarten curriculum reflected a shift toward academic focus and moved away from historic pedagogies, such as unstructured, open-ended, child-directed free play (Chervenak, 2011; Medellin, 2015; Nicolopoulou, 2010). Research shows that without time to play, there are physical, socioemotional, and cognitive disadvantages for children (Bergen, 2002; Bodrova,

2008; Burts, Hart, Charlesworth, Fleege, Mosley, & Thomasson, 1992; Burts, Hart, Charlesworth, & Kirk, 1990; Ginsburg et al., 2007; Graue, 2010).

With the widespread adoption of the Common Core State Standards, there continues to be an emphasis on academics, accountability for teachers, administrators, schools, and a narrowing of the curriculum as children spend most of their day learning math and language arts through didactic instruction (Cheng, 2012; Clarke, 2014; Editorial Projects in Education Research, 2013; Hipsher, 2014; Medellin, 2015; Riley, 2012; Wan, 2014). Play continues to be underutilized considering the benefits it can provide children, especially with regard to their social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development. In instances where play exists in kindergarten, it is more likely to be teacher-directed than child-directed, a difference that sacrifices much of the benefit for encouraging self-motivated learners, creativity, and personal inquiry (Ranz-Smith, 2007).

Research Questions

This study addressed three research questions in order to understand administrator, teacher, and parent perceptions of play in kindergarten:

1. What are parent, teacher, and administrator perceptions of play in a Catholic kindergarten classroom?
2. How is play implemented within the classroom?
    - To what extent is play child-directed?
3. What is the relationship between teacher, administrator, and parent perceptions of play and how is it implemented in the classroom?

Purpose of the Study

This study examined how parents, teachers, and administrators, conceive of play within the kindergarten curriculum. It explored their awareness of how play exists in the classroom, investigated what their ideas of play are for children at this age, and studied how these adults influenced the integration of play in the kindergarten curriculum. The study captured how play is utilized in the classroom and the extent to which students had an opportunity for child-directed play. Finally, the study sought to relate parent, teacher, and administrator perceptions of play with its implementation in the kindergarten program at one Catholic elementary school.

Significance of the Study

This study contributed to the field of early childhood education because it followed upon previous work that advocates for play within the kindergarten curriculum. It expanded upon previous studies on perceptions of play (Charlesworth, Hart, Burts, Mosley, & Fleege; Chervenak, 2011; Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, & Gryfe, 2008) by adding parents as participants in addition to teachers and administrators. Research has demonstrated that parental involvement supports student success (Epstein, 2011). Thus, this study included parents for their significant role in a child's education.

Previous research on perceptions of play has been limited to public education settings (Burts et al., 1990; Burts et al., 1992; Charlesworth et al., 1993; Chervenak, 2011; Riley, 2012). To diversify inquiry into play in elementary education settings, this study focused on a Catholic school. One of the defining characteristics of Catholic schools is their emphasis on communion and community (Ozar & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2012). In living out this mission, the National Standards and Benchmarks for Catholic Education says that Catholic schools should do

everything they can to "promote genuine trust and collaboration among teachers, with parents as the primary educators of their children" (Ozar & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2012, p. 3). Given the decision to include parents as important participants for the study, it was important to select a Catholic school for the study due to the emphasis that Catholic schools place on parent involvement.

Connection to Social Justice

From a social justice perspective, this study advocated for a return to play within the kindergarten classroom. In the current academically focused climate, kindergarteners are primarily taught through didactic, teacher-led, instructional practices (Editorial Projects in Education Research, 2013; Hipsher, 2014; Medellin, 2015; Miller & Almon, 2009; Riley, 2012). Research demonstrates that students who are taught in this manner experience higher levels of stress than peers who receive instruction in a developmentally appropriate manner (Bedrova, 2008; Ginsburg, 2007; Miller & Almon, 2009). Subjecting children to this type of passive learning experience denies them the opportunity to learn through their own discovery and exploration, as occurs easily during play. This approach also violates a Reggio-Emilia concept in which a child is viewed as "capable, competent, and possessing of rights- including the right to active membership and nurturing relationships within the school community" (New, 1998, p. 268).

Taking this argument further, Souto-Manning (2017) argued that play is a right, not a privilege for all children. Her claim is based on Article 31 of the United Nations Rights of the Child, which says that all children have the right to play. Souto-Manning said that when children in early childhood education settings are denied the right to play and must learn passively, they are actively being harmed.

Theoretical Framework

In order to explore and understand parent, teacher, and administrator perceptions, this study used a theoretical framework composed of three key pieces to disentangle the layers of meaning embedded in adult perceptions of play. (See Figure 1.) The first two gears of this framework are grounded in Early Childhood Education (ECE) theory and focus on student learning. Specifically, Constructivist theories, as characterized by the work of Vygotsky (1978) and Piaget (1962) focus on how children interact with their environment, peers, and teachers to build their knowledge of the world. Building upon these seminal pieces, the works of Gardner (1983) and Rinaldi (1998) deepen the connection between play and complex thought.

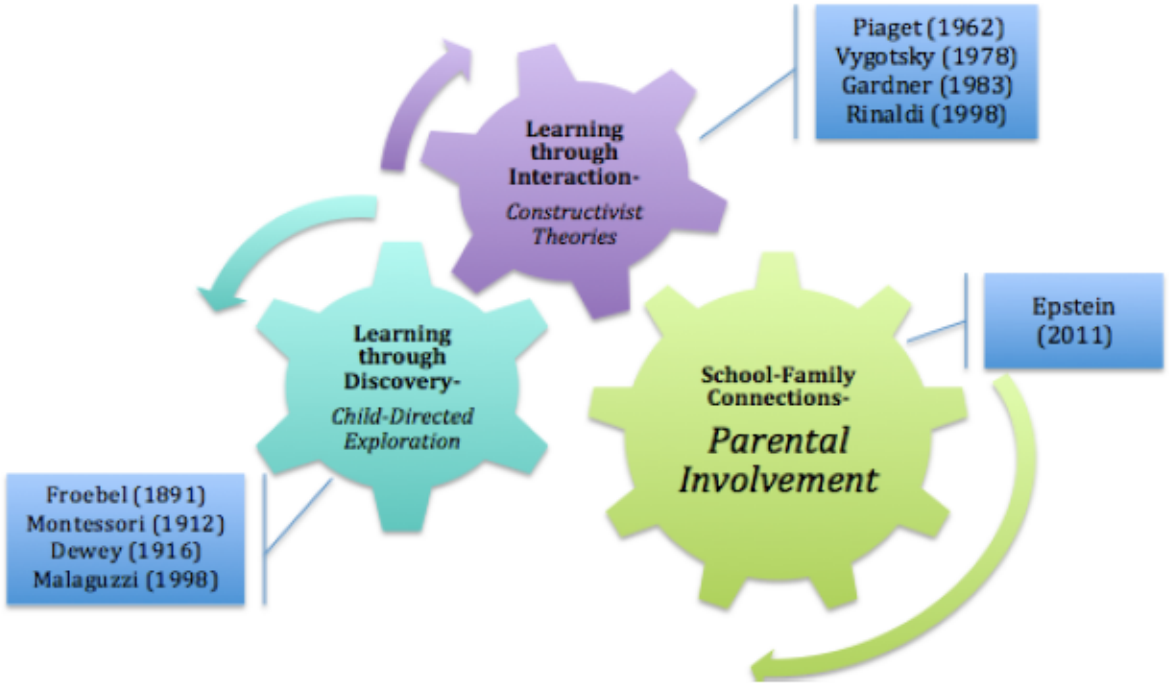

Figure 1. Theoretical framework: Understanding perceptions of play.

Secondly, theories related to child-directed exploration as presented by Froebel (1891), Montessori (1912), and Dewey (1916) provide a basis for understanding how play allows children to learn about the world using their own experiences. These works are brought into conversation with Malaguzzi (1998) as his work also touches on the concept of the child and links this concept with the right to play. Finally, this theoretical framework utilizes aspects of Epstein's (2011) Parental Involvement Framework to highlight the importance of family-school connections in promoting child development and learning.

Learning through Interaction: Constructivist Theories

Psychologists Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky are two of the most frequently cited early childhood theorists who link cognitive development to play (Medellin, 2015; Riley, 2012; Vardanyan, 2013). Both Piaget's and Vygotsky's constructivist models for child development center on the quotidian experiences and social interactions children encounter. To understand how relationships in the classroom are important to learning and how play contributes to building these relationships, it is necessary to review Piaget and Vygotsky's constructivist theories.

Psychologist Jean Piaget is credited with forming the concept of cognitive development theory. According to Piaget's theory (1962), children make sense of the world through "schema," a basic structure for understanding various phenomena in the world. As children encounter new experiences, they have an opportunity to integrate the experience into existing schema through "assimilation," or to "accommodate" the experience by creating a new schema (Piaget, 1962). When children play they practice schema that have already been assimilated or are at a place of equilibrium within their minds. Piaget explained that as children increase socialization during play—either with other children or adults—schema can become more complex as the play grows

more sophisticated. For example, when children can play games that require rules, take on symbolic roles, and closely imitate schema that is familiar, they are building knowledge at a higher level. In this study, understanding Piaget's theory of cognitive development will help characterize the play opportunities kindergarten students have in the classroom during a regular school day.

Vygotsky's (1978) socio-constructivist theory for cognitive development differs from Piaget's work in that Vygotsky places more emphasis on the importance of social interactions between children and peers, adults, or members of their community as being instrumental in making meaning in the world. According to Vygotsky's (1962) theory, as children hear language used to describe phenomena around them, they slowly begin to internalize that conversation until it forms an internal narrative for experiencing their world and culture.

Howard Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences is based on the idea that intelligence can be characterized in the number of ways humans engage with the world. For example, according to Gardner, intelligence is a blend of at least seven ways of knowing including linguistic, spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal modalities. Gardner's theory expands upon Piaget's and Vygotsky's theories as it further defines the many ways human cognition may express itself. Play, as a tool and a process, is a way for children to develop and nurture not simply a single, rather multiple intelligences or cognition.

Complementing Gardner's work, Carlina Rinaldi (1998), pedagogical director and educational consultant from Reggio Children, in Reggio Emilia, Italy, furthers the conversation on the importance of play to advance complex thought in children. Rinaldi, a self-described "social-constructivist," believes in the importance of children testing out their own theories and

ideas of the world using the social system of the school. Thus, when children play with their peers and interact with their teachers, they are also participating in a mental construction of their world.

As this study looked to understand how play existed in the kindergarten classroom, Vygotsky's and Piaget's constructivist theories provided a foundation for reflecting upon the interactions between teachers, parents, and children. More specifically, Gardner and Rinaldi's theories contributed to the theoretical lens that looked at how play was important to student learning.

Learning through Discovery: Child-Directed Exploration

Among Early Childhood education theorists who have written about and promoted child-directed exploration and self-discovery through play, Friedrich Froebel (1891), Maria Montessori (1912), and John Dewey (1916) are among the most notable for their contributions. Building upon these seminal works is the theoretical framework utilized in the work of Loris Malaguzzi (1998) to discuss conditions for promoting child-directed exploration to enhance learning. This section of the theoretical framework was useful in discovering how parents, teachers, and administrators identified and described child-directed exploration through play.

Froebel (1891) is famous for giving the name "child's garden" to his school in Germany, where he taught children from ages three to seven (Bryant & Clifford, 1992). His philosophy included educating young children's body, mind, and soul through play, music, movement, creativity, and building their sense of independence (Froebel, 1906). Part of Froebel's methods included allowing children to explore their own interests through "self-activity." As children engaged in what we would now refer to as child-directed exploration or play, they would feel joy

from the natural stimulation that comes with following one's interests. Children were encouraged to *do* as well as learn (Froebel, 1906).

Like Froebel, Montessori (1912) is well known for her views on child-directed learning. As a trained physician and scientist turned educator, Montessori believed children learned best when they moved about and followed their interests in an environment that supported exploration as compared to other contemporary schools that made students sit at a desk all day. She wrote, "to stimulate life—leaving it then free to develop, to unfold—herein lies the first task of the educator" (Montessori, 1912, p. 115). With didactic toys she developed, Montessori's students were engaged with principles in geometry, phonics, and real-world tasks, like food preparation and hygiene. Her philosophy continues to influence educators and parents for the emphasis it places on intrinsic learning and self-discovery.

Montessori's contemporary and critic, John Dewey (1916) was known to disagree with Montessori on a number of issues including the use of self-correcting didactic toys and limiting child creativity during play. However, one philosophical tenet Dewey shared with Montessori was the belief that the individual should direct his/her learning while the teacher serves as a guide. In one of his most well-known works, *Democracy and Education* (1916), Dewey expounded upon the benefits play holds to promote individual exploration. Furthermore, Dewey believed that when children play and *do*, there is more potential for them to develop thinking skills.

Loris Malaguzzi (1998) established an approach to early childhood education in the Reggio Emilia region of Italy following World War II in response to the community's need for rebuilding and as a way to reimagine education. Malaguzzi's approach distinguished itself in its

strong concept of the child as a trusted, active, and respected individual capable of exploring, learning, and communicating with teachers and caregivers. Another important feature was the importance Malaguzzi placed on the community as a whole. According to Malaguzzi, the community, parents, teachers, and all citizens, were part of the child's educational journey. These aspects of Malaguzzi's philosophical and pedagogical approach provided the theoretical framework with important tenets, including the right of the child to play and the importance of the community in a child's education.

These theories contributed to understanding and analyzing teacher, parent, and administrator perceptions of play and its importance to the kindergarten curriculum.

School-Family Connection: Parent Involvement

To fully understand the importance of parents and their role in kindergarten, I drew upon Epstein's (2011) Parental Involvement framework. According to Epstein, teachers, as representatives of the school, and parents, as representative of the community, play a major role in supporting student growth. Her framework for parent involvement highlights six ways parents are involved in the schools. (See Table 1.)

Table 1

Epstein's Framework of Parental Involvement

Type 1—Parenting	Type 2—Communicating	Type 3—Volunteering	Type 4—Learning at Home	Type 5—Decision Making	Type 6—Collaborating with the Community
Help all families establish home environment to support children as students.	Design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs and their children's progress.	Recruit and organize parent help and support.	Provide information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning.	Include parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives.	Identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development.

Note: Adapted from Epstein, 2011, p. 395

Three types of parental involvement were particularly relevant to this study. These include Type 2, Communicating; Type 4, Learning at Home; and Type 5, Decision Making. These three were selected because they highlight how parents bridge the connection between school and home.

Research Design and Methodology

The research questions for this study were explored using a single-case study design. According to Yin (2014), a single-case study is appropriate when investigating a particular theory or specific interest in great detail. Yin has described five rationales that may dictate when a single case study is appropriate. These include: having a *critical* case, which can confirm,

challenge, or extend a theory; an *unusual* case, which captures phenomenon that deviates from the norm; a *common* case, which captures the circumstances and conditions of an everyday situation; a *revelatory case,* which provides insight into a situation that was previously inaccessible to social science researchers; or a *longitudinal* case, which looks at the same single case at multiple points over time (Yin, 2014). Given this study's focus on capturing perceptions of play and how play is implemented in one Catholic school's kindergarten program, the common case rationale drives the selection of a single-case design. Specifically, the study examined parent, teacher, and administrator perceptions of play in kindergarten at one Catholic school while investigating how play was incorporated at the classroom level.

Methods of data collection included classroom observations, field notes, document analysis of lesson plans and school publications, and interviews with three teachers, school principal and vice principal, and four parent participants with children in kindergarten. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

The site for this research study was a Catholic Archdiocesan school in a suburb of Los Angeles. The school housed grades Transitional kindergarten through eighth grade and had a population of about five hundred students. The kindergarten program, made of two classrooms of transitional kindergarten and two classrooms of kindergarten, comprised the case for this study. The school was a double-grade school, which meant it had two classrooms per grade level. This unique feature allowed each classroom to serve as subunits for the case.

Upon securing Institutional Review Board approval, school visits and classroom observations were first in the data collection process. An observation protocol designed by the researcher was used for each classroom observation. Secondly, interviews were arranged and

conducted with parents, teachers, and administrators. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed on an on-going basis throughout the course of the fieldwork. Throughout the data collection process, documents such as lesson plans and the school handbook were collected and reviewed.

Data analysis followed an inductive approach. Inductive analysis led "to the emergence of concepts" (Yin, 2011, p. 4). MaxQDA Version 12 Software was used to organize and code the data. The data were reviewed initially to reveal emerging themes. Themes were then organized into patterns using visual mapping tools through the MaxQDA software. This visual mapping was helpful in understanding how the codes worked together and related to each other. Later, the theoretical framework was helpful in relating the findings back to literature from the field and further unpacking adult perceptions of play in the kindergarten curriculum.

Limitations

The study's limitations are common to all qualitative case studies. Whenever possible, efforts were taken to mitigate their effects on the study. One limitation was the purposive sample and site selection. Before selecting the site, a list of criteria was drafted in order to ensure that the research questions could be explored to the fullest extent possible. The school selected satisfied these criteria, and its location allowed the researcher to consider the constraints of time and resources to facilitate a level of rapport and trust needed to conduct in-depth interviews with teachers, administrators, and parents.

In choosing a single-case study design, findings were limited in their generalizability, even when compared to other Catholic schools within the same archdiocese. However, selecting

this methodology was most fitting because it offered an opportunity to engage in a deep conversation with one school community about their perceptions of play in kindergarten.

It is recognized that classroom observations for the study only provided snapshots of how play is incorporated in the classroom. While it would have been ideal to spend extended amounts of time observing the kindergarten, 10 site visits were conducted to provide the researcher with multiple opportunities to observe how and whether play was used at various times and on different days of the week. Overall, time spent at the site covered a span of three months.

Definitions of Key Terms

Child-directed: A description of a student-centered pedagogical approach to education. When adults promote child-directed exploration, learning, or play, they acknowledge and validate the child's own interests and agency to develop those interests. Built on the writing of Froebel (1891), Montessori (1912), and Dewey (1916), this study argues for a return to child-directed experiences in the classroom, especially as they relate to play within the classroom.

Common Core State Standards: current curricular standards adopted by many states in their effort to satisfy criteria for federal funding as part of the *Race to the Top* (2009) grant. The Common Core State Standards were part of an initiative developed by the Business Roundtable and the National Governor's Association after concerns emerged regarding the need to better prepare students for 21st-century skills, like information technology and critical thinking (McDonald, 2011).

Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP): an educational "best practice" based on child development theory. Play is considered a developmentally appropriate practice for all

children (Ginsburg et al., 2007; NAEYC, 2009). According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), developmentally appropriate practice is based on three categories of knowledge (NAEYC, 2009):

1. Knowledge of child development, age-related characteristics, and a 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 Education (ECE): a subfield of education covering the care and development of children from birth through age eight. Early Childhood Education is commonly understood to include day-care and preschool, but it also includes prekindergarten, transitional kindergarten, and kindergarten programs.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB): The federal legislation enacted in 2001 that led to education reforms based on the belief that American students were falling behind their global counterparts. Reforms stemming from NCLB focused on high standards for teaching and learning, creating measurable goals, and increasing accountability for all population subgroups through high-stakes testing (Leyva, 2009).

Perceptions: Assumptions, values, and understandings regarding a certain topic. In the context of this study, adult perceptions of play are investigated and explored. Participants may or may not be consciously aware of their perceptions of play. Perceptions were revealed through careful exploration of interview transcripts, classroom observations, and

document analysis in this study. Through the study presented here, the goal was to understand and unpack teacher, administrator, and parent perceptions of play and its role in the kindergarten curriculum at one Catholic elementary school.

Play: Activities freely chosen and directed by children. Some types of play can include gross and fine motor, rules-based, construction, make-believe, language, symbolic, and rough and tumble play, to name some variations (Miller & Almon, 2009).

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter one of this dissertation presented an introduction to the study, statement of the problem, and research questions. It continued with the study's purpose, a description of the theoretical framework, research design, and methodology. In closing, the chapter touched upon study limitations, defined key terms, and concluded with a description of the chapter. Chapter two presents a review of the literature relevant to understanding topics in the study, including early childhood education theory and current practices of play, parent perceptions of play and academics in kindergarten, reception to an increasingly academic early childhood curriculum and Common Core Standards, and Catholic education. Chapter three presents a detailed description of the research design, methodology, procedures for data collection, and analysis. Chapter four presents findings from the field and analysis of emergent themes. Chapter five concludes the dissertation with a discussion of the themes and reconnects findings with the literature presented in chapter two. It concludes with implications of the study, recommendations, and leaves the reader with the researcher's reflections.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

From its inception, kindergarten has been a way for preprimary children to develop their social, emotional, and cognitive skills. Yet over the last 150 years, kindergarten in America has changed to accommodate the political, social, and economic demands of society (Nawrotzki, 2009; Read, 2013; Vecchiotti, 2001). The effects of neoliberal reforms in education have contributed to a heightened focus on American students' academic performance, especially as they compare to their global counterparts. As a result, teachers and students in kindergarten are enmeshed in a fraught climate of accountability focused on achieving career and college readiness vis-à-vis the Common Core Standards Curriculum. How can kindergarten stay true to its whole-child philosophy—as envisioned by the Friedrich Froebel, "father of kindergarten,"—while meeting the rigor of today's curriculum? One answer cited in the literature is to use play, a developmentally appropriate practice, to support student development and growth (Ginsburg et al., 2007; Graue, 2010; Miller & Almon, 2009; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009; Patte, 2010; Vecchiotti, 2001).

For many years, most kindergarten teachers have agreed that play is important for students, yet, implementation of this practice within the classroom varies to a great extent (Cheng, 2012; Clarke, 2014; Editorial Projects in Education Research, 2013; Hipsher, 2014; Lopez, 2015; 2015; Riley, 2012; Wan, 2014). These variations include time allotted during the day, materials offered, teacher engagement, and student choice for the play activity. Play within the classroom is also often subject to the individual teacher and/or administrative preferences as well as district or state guidelines (Miller & Almon, 2009). Given this wide variation, child-

directed play within the classroom is at risk of being squeezed out of kindergarten (Hirsh-Pasek, Michnick Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009). Research supports play as a developmentally appropriate, multifaceted activity that helps children process their learning, build relationships with peers, and make sense of their world (Bergen, 2002; Fjørtoft, 2001; Ginsburg et al., 2007; Schroeder, 2007; Starling, 2011; Uren & Stagnitti, 2009).

The literature reviewed in this section provides context and background necessary to fully consider the study's research questions. These questions include:

1. What are parent, teacher, and administrator perceptions of play in a Catholic kindergarten classroom?
2. How is play implemented within the classroom?
    - To what extent is play child-directed?
3. What is the relationship between teacher, administrator, and parent perceptions of play and how is it implemented in the classroom?

Thus, the chapter will focus on three main areas: (a) defining play and how its role within kindergarten has changed over time; (b) describing the current educational landscape and its influence on adult perceptions of play in kindergarten, and (c) providing background on Catholic education, specifically as it relates to kindergarten. These areas are further broken down into subcategories including unstructured play, developmentally appropriate practice, adult perceptions of the Common Core, and how perspectives on Catholic early childhood education help to understand the intersection between Common Core and pedagogy in a Catholic kindergarten program. The literature provides background on child-directed play and its role as a developmentally appropriate practice in kindergarten, and presents evidence on current play

practices in early childhood education. The literature review ends by looking at how play is relevant in Catholic early childhood education.

Theoretical Framework

This study used a three-part theoretical framework as a lens to investigate parent, teacher, and administrator perceptions of play in kindergarten. Cogs and gears serve as a graphic representation of three theories working in concert to inform adult perceptions of play. The following section will review each of these pieces of the theoretical framework. First, Constructivist theories, as attributed to Piaget (1962) and Vygotsky (1978), connect play with learning through interaction. This piece of the framework is further developed by the works of Gardner (1983) and Rinaldi (1998) to extend the constructivist theories more specifically into how play contributes to complex thought in children. Secondly, the framework focuses on child-directed exploration and reviews works by Froebel (1891), Montessori (1912), Dewey (1916), and Malaguzzi (1998). These four authors are instrumental in understanding how child-directed exploration enhances learning. Finally, the third theoretical piece explores aspects of Epstein's (2011) Parental Involvement Framework as a way to highlight the importance of parents as partners in education.

Learning through Interaction: Constructivist Theories

Both Jen Piaget (1896–1980) and Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) emphasized the importance of play for children's cognitive development (Wong & Logan, 2016). They each approach cognitive development through constructivism. According to this view, children gradually understand and internalize their world based on interactions through facilitated experience. While Piaget and Vygotsky were not known as early childhood education advocates, their ideas

have been used to inform the foundation of many play-based early childhood educational programs around the globe (Wong & Logan, 2016). The following section highlights a few of both men's most salient theories as they relate to play and cognitive development in children.

Piaget and play. In his work, *Play, Dreams, and Imitation* (1962), Piaget outlined his theory on play, its role in cognitive development, and how the two work in concert throughout a child's early life. Piaget's theories were based on naturalistic observations of children engaged in play (Wong & Logan, 2016). For Piaget, play has three stages: practice play, symbolic play, and games with rules. As children progress through these stages, they use "schema," a basic structure for understanding, to "assimilate" or "accommodate" experience.

Piaget (1962) wrote: "I am an interactionist. What interests me is the creation of new thoughts…constructed within the individual himself, constructed internally through the process of *reflexive abstraction* and constructed externally through the process of experience" (p. 26, italics my own). This term *reflexive abstraction* refers to a cognitive action carried out by the individual child. For example, through "simple abstraction," individuals discover the properties of objects by observation; children can understand properties such as weight, length, and capacity in this simple way (Piaget, 1962). On the other hand, when children use *reflexive abstraction,* cognitive development is likely to increase because engagement grows increasingly complex; from observation to manipulation based on individual own actions (Piaget, 1962). In essence, *reflexive abstraction* is Piaget's way of explaining learning through play. He wrote:

> The essential thing is that in order for a child to understand something, he must construct it himself, he must re-invent it. Every time we teach a child something, we keep him from

> inventing it himself. On the other hand, that which we allow him to discover by himself will remain with him visibly…for all the rest of his life. (Piaget, 1962, p. 27)

Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development. Like Piaget, Vygotsky believed children internalize their world through play, but his approach, known as a socio-constructivist theory, emphasizes the social context of interactions between children, their peers, and other adults (Wong & Logan, 2016). Vygotsky argued: "Cognitive development occurs as the result of a dialectical exchange between the individual's biology and their historical, social and cultural contexts- including people (such as other children and adults) and tools (such as language and play-materials)" (Wong & Logan, 2016, p.18). In his book *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes,* Vygotsky expounded on his theory of socio-constructivism as it relates to the "zone of proximal development," the point at which an individual is capable of doing something with the assistance of a more experienced helper so that the individual may eventually complete the task independently (Vygotsky, 1978). He wrote:

> In play the child is always behaving beyond his age, above his usual everyday behavior, in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself… The relationship of play to development should be compared to the relationship between instruction and development…play is a source of development and creates the zone of proximal development. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 74)

Thus it is through language and interaction between child and the parent, teacher, or peer that children develop cognition.

Multiple Intelligence Theory. Howard Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences influences current practices in early childhood education to the extent that educators plan

activities and experiences for young children that consider the diversity of strengths students' possess. According to Gardner's theory, intelligence is a blend of at least seven ways of knowing the world. These include (a) linguistic intelligence: skills related to speaking, writing, and listening; (b) spatial intelligence: understanding objects in space and how they move; (c) musical intelligence: singing, playing an instrument, or composing music; (d) bodily-kinesthetic intelligence: using the body to achieve physical movement; (e) interpersonal intelligence: understanding others and being aware of their feelings, verbal, and nonverbal communication; (f) intrapersonal intelligence: an ability to know oneself and possess insight into personal behavior, goals, and awareness of one's emotions (Gardner, 1983).

Gardner's (1983) theory contributes to the constructivist theories described above because it provides a basis for understanding play as a way that children can develop multiple facts of their cognition. Using play as a methodology, children can explore and nurture knowledge in a variety of media and activities: writing, drawing, and dramatizing, through performance, and by engaging in dialogue with peers and adults. Play permits children to access these intelligences and advances complex thoughts, which develops their overall cognition.

Rinaldi and the "Social-Constructivist" approach. Carlina Rinaldi, director of the schools for young children and the infant-toddler centers describes the educational approach taken at the Reggio-Emilia schools as one that emphasizes relationships, communications, and interactions between parents, educators, and children (Rinaldi, 1998). When it comes to how children develop more complex thought and cognition, she wrote: "We have always maintained that children have their own questions and theories, and that they negotiate their theories with others" (Rinaldi, 1998, p. 120). This social give-and-take between children and their peers or

teachers happens naturally during play in the Reggio-Emilia approach. Forman and Fyf (1998) wrote: "The curriculum is not child centered or teacher directed. The curriculum is child originated and teacher framed" (p. 240). Thus, the product of a child's cognitive journey is from interactions between their own thoughts or theories and how these are confirmed, pushed, or reimagined through a social exchange and experience.

To expand on how children learn through child-directed exploration, the next piece of the theoretical framework focuses on early childhood theorists who have looked at discovery and child-directed play.

Learning through Discovery: Child-Directed Exploration

It is crucial to understand theories that support child-directed exploration because these theories influence the degree to which teachers, adults, or administrators believe child-directed play is important in kindergarten. This section reviews the work of Friedrich Froebel (1891), Maria Montessori (1912), John Dewey (1916), and Loris Malaguzzi (1998). These works set the foundation for establishing why child-directed play is crucial for enhancing learning. This section of the theoretical framework also includes a brief discussion on current play practices in early childhood education and how these practices are informed by the theories mentioned in this study.

Froebel: The father of kindergarten. Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852) is one of the most influential play-based advocates for children in kindergarten (Wong & Logan, 2016). Froebel was a deeply religious man who developed the first kindergarten in Germany during the mid-nineteenth century. Children would be able to study science, math, and preliteracy skills through play and with the support of an educated teacher (Wong & Logan, 2016). Froebel believed

deeply in play for its transformative power. He wrote: "Play is the purest, most spiritual activity of man at this stage, and, at the same time, typical of human life as a whole—of the inner hidden natural life in man and all things" (Froebel, 1826, p. 55). Froebel also believed that, through play, children's learning would continue throughout their lives; as he wrote: "The plays of childhood are the germinal leaves of all later life" (Froebel, 1826, p. 55).

Because of his deep belief in play, Froebel created educational toys known as "gifts" for children to explore. Some gifts included blocks, wooden balls or cubes, and bricks, among others (Prochner, 2010; Wong & Logan, 2016). Many of these items continue to be important to kindergarten today (Prochner, 2010). Additionally, Froebel designed "occupations," or curriculum activities designed to foster useful skills. Students were encouraged to move through the gifts, from simple to increasingly complex tasks. In addition to these tasks, Froebel supported language play through music. He encouraged mothers to sing songs for their babies and recite finger rhymes. Through these methods, children would also be able to explore their personal interest through "self-activity" (Froebel, 1906). For Froebel, learning was not divorced from learning. He encouraged children to develop their body, mind, and soul through play, music, movement, and creativity, as these skills would also help children develop their own interests.

Thus, Froebel's vision for kindergarten included opportunities for children to explore the physical world around them. They were to play with language, music, movement, and manipulatives like those that made up the "gifts." Since Froebel's vision of kindergarten eventually spread around Europe and across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas, his legacy and beliefs about child-exploration and play continue to impact kindergarten classrooms (Bryant & Clifford, 1992; DuCharme, 1996; DeCos, 1997; Hewes, 1995). Froebel's idea of using play as

pedagogy for children in early education settings sparked others to follow. His whole-child approach set the foundation for other educators to model their own practices after his own. Ultimately, this association between learning and play brought more attention to a methodology that would later become more widespread.

Maria Montessori: Play is work. Maria Montessori's (1870–1952) contributions to play-based pedagogy stem from her work with orphans in Rome's poorest neighborhoods at the turn of the twentieth century (Wong & Logan, 2016). As a trained medical doctor, Montessori brought a scientific perspective to education. She made careful records as she observed children at play. Based on these observations, Montessori formulated a very specific pedagogy that she believed would be applicable to all children, given the success it had achieved with the poorest children at the *Casa Dei Bambini,* Children's House, in Rome's slums at San Lorenzo (Montessori, 1912/1964). This pedagogy was based on playful learning, child-directed exploration, self-correcting didactic materials, child-friendly furniture, and a belief that children should be supported in their growing independence (Wong & Logan, 2016).

Unlike the schools of her day, Montessori's classrooms had child-sized furniture and open shelving with materials easily accessible for children to use and play with. She wrote: "We must also make ready the school for their observation. The school must permit *free, natural manifestations* of the *child* if in the school scientific pedagogy is to be born" (Montessori, 1912/1964, p. 15). This approach reflects two of Montessori's greatest contributions to early childhood education: (a) the belief that the school should serve children's needs, and (b) the belief that children should be free to explore their own interests. Indeed, in describing the need for children to move about the classroom and not be confined to sitting at a desk she wrote: "We

must reflect on what will happen to the spirit of a child whose body is condemned to grow in such an artificial and vicious fashion" (Montessori, 1962, p.13). Montessori believed that children would be intrinsically motivated when they were afforded this freedom and choice following their own interests through play. Independence was then both a means and an end of education:

> Little by little, as a child proceeds along this way, he will freely manifest himself with greater clarity and truth and thus reveal his own proper nature…Education cannot be effective unless it helps a child to open up himself to life. (Montessori, 1962, p. 57)

For Montessori, child's play was work. In other words, children had a job; it was to play. Play was what children were called to do and what they enjoyed. When presented with the proper materials, Montessori observed, "he [the child] becomes so attentive to what he is doing and so immersed in his own that he does not notice what is going on about him but continues to work…" (Montessori, 1962, p. 102). Teachers were encouraged to redirect children who engaged in fantasy or make-believe play (Wong & Logan, 2016). Instead, children were to engage in practical life tasks, or real-world occupations such as cleaning their classroom, helping with meal preparation, washing dishes, or otherwise work with the self-teaching materials presented in the classroom. According to Montessori's pedagogy, "a child is urged on to act by his own interior drives and no longer by the teacher" (Montessori, 1962, p.103).

Montessori's perspective on early childhood education was revolutionary for her time and continues to influence educators in their approach to child-driven exploration. Her writings and pedagogy strengthen the idea that children have a right to play. According to her work,

children naturally guide their own learning by following their own observations, insights, and explorations.

Dewey: Play and experience. John Dewey (1859–1952) was an American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer whose ideas remain significant to education and social reform (Baldacchino, 2014). A pragmatist, Dewey lauded the potential for humanity to find experience, imagination, and the possibilities to emerge from a disposition toward liberty (Baldacchino, 2014). His contributions to education take on a particularly salient tone when considering play as a way of providing children with the opportunity to use experience and imagination. For this study, it is important to understand how Dewey's philosophy continues to resonate with and influence educators in allowing for child-directed play in the classroom.

In *Democracy and Education* (1916), Dewey discussed the role of play in the curriculum. He wrote: "play and work correspond…in learning how to do things and in acquaintance with things and processes gained in the doing" (Dewey, 1916, p. 229). Here Dewey explained the importance of the experience that accompanies the learning. Children need to actively participate in their learning and play naturally provides a pedagogical tool for doing so. However, unlike Montessori and Froebel, who had classroom materials in kindergarten that were to be used for a specific purpose, as in Froebel's gifts to learn about geometry or Montessori's puzzles to learn about shapes, Dewey expressed the opportunity that may arise when students are allowed to make mistakes through exploring "crude materials" at their will (Dewey, 1916). By having child-directed play, students are able to be creative, solve problems, and develop thinking skills. Dewey suggested that children be taught how to develop the skills to seek what may satisfy their

desire to play (Dewey, 1916). This is important, he wrote, "for the sake of its lasting effect upon habits of mind" (Dewey, 1916, p. 241).

For Dewey, the role of educators was to help students identify, encourage, and guide their interests (Noddings, 2010). The teacher should provide an opportunity for students to interact with subject matter and have a meaningful interaction or experience with it. Thus, the student benefits from having a teacher who is like a guide, helping to interpret and make sense of the learning as it occurs. Once again, in *Democracy and Education,* Dewey wrote:

> [The child] learns in consequence of his direct activities. The better methods of teaching a child, say, to read, follow the same road. They do not fix his attention upon the fact that he has to learn something…They engage his activities, and in the process of engagement he learns. (as quoted in Noddings, p. 276)

Concept of the child: Foundations in the Reggio-Emilia approach. According to the Reggio Emilia approach, children direct their learning based on personal explorations as well as through their discussions with teachers and peers. Loris Malaguzzi, founder of the program in Reggio Emilia, said, "The objective of education is to increase possibilities for the child to invent and discover. Words should not be used as a shortcut to knowledge. Like Piaget, we agree that the aim of teaching is to provide conditions for learning" (Malaguzzi, 1998, p. 83). In this way, teachers and other adults "should intervene as little as possible. Instead they should set up situations, and make many choices that facilitate the work of children" (Malaguzzi, 1998, p. 91). Play, as a form of learning, should be child-directed. After all, according to Malaguzzi, children "always and everywhere take an active role in the construction and acquisition of learning and understanding" (Malaguzzi, 1998, p. 67). In this way, the role of the teacher is to support the

child and follow the child's natural exploration. It is to observe students, facilitate meaningful interactions by setting up a stimulating environment, and dialogue with children as they interact with their world.

Both Vygotsky and Piaget's theories, as they relate to play, focus on the child as an active agent in cognitive development. The Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education adopts this perspective and connects Piaget and Vygotsky's theories with a unique concept of the child:

> For us, each child is unique and the protagonist of his or her own growth. We also note that children desire to gain knowledge, have much capacity for curiosity and amazement, and yearn to create ties with others and to communicate. Children are so open to exchange and reciprocity. From early in life they negotiate with the social and physical world- with everything the culture brings to them. (Filippini, 1998, pp. 128–129)

This concept of the child includes a view that "the child [is] capable, competent, and possessing of rights-including the right to active membership and nurturing relationships within the school community" (New, 1998, p.268). The child is trusted, encouraged, and listened to. The Reggio image of the child is an extension of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development theory: "children are viewed as capable of doing more than they are typically permitted" (New, 1998, p. 274).

Taken together, these four theorists: Froebel, Montessori, Dewey, and Malaguzzi center on the child's right to move through the world with an opportunity to play. According to their views, play is the most natural way for children to explore and understand the world around them. In addition to being a way for children to construct knowledge of the world through

personal and social interactions, by playing, children are exhibiting the right to exist as an individual with agency.

School-Family Connection: Parental Involvement

This final section of the theoretical framework focuses on Epstein's (2011) Parental Involvement Framework and how aspects of it relate most significantly to the inquiry of this study. According to Epstein (2011), teachers and parents, as representatives of the school-home connection, play a major role in supporting student growth. When educators view parents and the community as partners, they share interests in and responsibilities for children (Epstein, 2011). According to Epstein, these partnerships can "improve school programs and climate, provide family service and support, increase parents' skills and leadership, connect families with others in the school and community, and help teachers with their work" (p. 389). Epstein breaks parental involvement into the following six types: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. However, for this study, three parts of Epstein's framework, communicating, learning at home, and decision making, will be most relevant in substantiating why parent perceptions on play should be considered alongside those of teachers and administrators.

Communicating. The central feature of effective communication between school and home, and vice-versa, is to be sure information is making its way to the most influential adults in a child's educational career. This communication may be about school programs, curriculum, or student progress. Sample practices include following a regular schedule of notices, memos, newsletters, phone calls, or other similar communications. Likewise, providing parents with clear information to inform choices on courses, programs, and activities within the school also falls

within this category. Epstein acknowledged that some challenges present themselves to clear communication including language barriers, frequency of all notices from the school that may contribute to over-saturation of materials for parents. Yet most importantly, Epstein (2011) emphasized that communications from school to home are meant to flow back and forth, not simply in one direction. Understanding this form of parental involvement as well as the challenges it presents can inform the relationship between parent, teacher, and educator perceptions of play and its implementation in kindergarten.

Learning at home. This type of parental involvement encompasses providing information and ideas to families about how to help students at home, either with homework or other curricular activities, decisions, or planning (Epstein, 2011). Examples include providing information for families on the skills required in all subjects for each grade, encouraging students to discuss and interact with their families on what they learn in class, providing opportunities for families to learn together at family math/ science/reading nights, and utilizing family participation in setting student goals for each year. Some challenges to this include designing and scheduling learning opportunities that encourage students to discuss what they learn with their family and involving families and children in all-important curriculum-related decisions (Epstein, 2011). The primary benefit of this parental involvement is when help at home means parents encourage, listen to, engage with, guide, and discuss school subjects. For the study, this type of parental involvement can highlight ways parents support children and encourage play at home in light of how play is incorporated into the kindergarten classroom.

Decision making. Parental involvement of this type means including parents in school decisions by developing parent leaders and representatives in organizations like PTA/PTO,

advisory councils, or committees. It also means providing parents with information about school or local elections. Finally, another example of is to utilize networking to link all families with the parent representatives. According to Epstein (2011), challenges to this type of involvement can mean making sure parent representatives include parents from all racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and other groups within the school. Secondly, training parents in this leadership capacity might also prove troublesome if it is not done consistently. Epstein takes decision making to mean "a process of partnership of shared views and actions toward shared goals" (p. 399). Parent leaders should therefore work toward true representation by listening to and communicating with other families in this process. For this study, this particular aspect of Epstein's framework was important in looking at how parents were involved in the decision-making process regarding how curriculum was implemented in kindergarten.

Current Practices in Early Childhood Education

The theories previously reviewed continue to influence and impact early childhood education. This section relates how current practices and pedagogies have been influenced by the theories related to how children learn through interaction and child-directed discovery.

Tools of the Mind. This curricular approach developed by Dr. Elena Bodrova and Dr. Deborah Leong focuses on using Vygotskian theory in conjunction with information on brain development from neuroscience research (Tools of the Mind, 2017). According to Vygotsky's theory, children can learn to use mental tools, when properly guided, to become in charge of their own learning and transform their physical, social and emotional behaviors (Tools of the Mind, 2016). Play planning is an important strategy in the Tools of the Mind curriculum. Before students play with blocks, dramatic play, or other toys, they create a play describing what they

will do. This opportunity to brainstorm their anticipated activity enriches students' play experiences because it helps them focus and approach their play with an idea of what they will do. Through the Tools curriculum, children dedicate significant effort to dramatic play. Students create plans for what they will play or learn that day. This activity helps students develop their executive functioning skills. Play allows scaffolding between students, and facilitates their growth as they access the Zone of Proximal development when interacting with their more proficient peers or teachers.

The Tools approach treats children with respect as it engages them in a meaningful way in their own learning. The process of creating a play plan asks children to first consider what they would enjoy playing then challenges them to follow that plan and build upon it. In this way, students are developing the confidence to direct their own learning and become accountable as they follow through on their plans.

Guided Play. One final movement in early childhood education worth mentioning is the idea of "guided play" (Weisber, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Kittredge, & Klahr, 2016). This approach combines the benefits of free play with those of adult scaffolding of those experiences. During *guided play*, students are free to choose the best way to apply their natural abilities and curiosities as manifested during play to a task or in a way that meets objectives set by adults. Weisber et al. (2016) described guided play as existing in two possible scenarios. In one, adults design the play setting and highlight a learning goal while ensuring the children have autonomy to explore. The second form of guided play occurs when adults watch child-directed activities and make comments or ask questions that encourage the child to extend critical thinking (Weisber et al., 2016). During guided play, children are allowed to pursue interests and engage in

activities in which they are actively involved. The locus of control remains with the child (Weisberg et al., 2016).

The theory behind guided play can be identified as Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development." This critical zone exists at the point where children are ready to meet new skills with the coaching or guidance of experts who have already accomplished those skills. Guided play uses adult interaction during play to achieve this goal. Guided play also demonstrates an underlying vision of the child as competent and capable. Much like Resources for Infant Educares and Reggio Emilia approach, guided play is based on a deep respect for the child and the child's experience. It is also easy to see the theoretical influence of Montessori and Dewey in guided play. Montessori and Dewey emphasized the importance of experience and child-directed exploration. Guided play incorporates this vision into its practice. Through this approach it is easy to see the connection between Vygotsky, Montessori, and Dewey. Children are appreciated for their gifts, talents, and nurtured in a developmentally appropriate way.

This review of each piece of the theoretical framework and how the theories inform current practices in early childhood education will assist in understanding play, adult perceptions of its role in kindergarten, and how these perceptions relate to how play is implemented within the classroom. Building on the theories described here, the following section describes the definition of play to be used in this inquiry.

Definition of Play

Children have a natural inclination for play. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child listed play as an essential part of healthy child development (1989). Play has also been linked with both physical and emotional health (Ginsburg et al., 2007). For the

purposes of this paper, "play" will refer to activities freely chosen and directed by students. Within this definition, many types of play exist including gross and fine motor, rules-based, construction, make-believe, language, symbolic, and rough-and-tumble play to name a few (Miller & Almon, 2009). Recess has also long been recognized as a venue that allows students time for unstructured play during the school day (Jarrett & Waite-Stupiansky, 2009). Recess reflects school, district, or even statewide policies, while teachers have more autonomy in developing parameters for classroom play. For the purpose of this study, the literature will focus on classroom unstructured play.

A Brief History: Play and Pedagogy in Kindergarten

In 1837, Friedrich Froebel opened a small school for young children ages three to seven in Blankenburg, Germany. In 1840, he named it *Kindergarten,* literally translated as a "children's garden." His philosophy espoused education of the mind, body, and soul through play, outdoor exploration, music, movement, and creativity, to foster and develop children's independence (Bryant & Clifford, 1992). According to Froebel, the German kindergarten had a single purpose:

> The bodily and mental powers are to be awakened and developed, ways and means for their exercise indicated and provided, and assistants trained; so that every child, no matter of what rank or condition, may here be able to work out and faithfully express his real nature, character and true vocation in life; educating himself as well as being educated. (Froebel, 1891, p. 221)

Froebel's methods were unique for the time. Traditionally, children were taught by rote and expected to learn by sitting and listening to a lecturing teacher (Read, 2013). Froebel's methods

guided children to play as they learned and interacted with objects and exercises he called, "gifts." Froebel's curriculum centered on play-based learning that drew on children's interests (Nawrotzki, 2009; Read, 2013; Vecchiotti, 2001). As Froebel's philosophy and methods spread across Germany, by the late 1800s, more and more kindergartens opened and preschool aged children had an opportunity to learn and grow. It was not long before Froebel's disciples spread his philosophy beyond Germany to France, Holland, Italy, England, and across the Atlantic to the United States (DeCos, 1997). In 1860, Elizabeth Peabody opened the first English-language kindergarten in Boston (DeCos, 1997; Hewes, 1995). Only 20 years later, there were kindergartens in most large American cities. "In 1906, eighteen organizations supported 362 free kindergartens in New York City alone" (Nawrotzki, 2009, p. 183).

Over time and with each new location, implementation varied slightly, yet central to the kindergarten curriculum was play and the use of concrete-learning materials, like those Froebel developed (Prochner, 2010). By the mid-1930s, Froebel's system had begun to be more loosely interpreted by kindergarten teachers. Educators such as Patti Smith Hill, a former kindergarten teacher and professor at Teachers College, Columbia University, "proposed a curriculum that was relevant and child-focused, allowing for initiative and creativity" (Bryant & Clifford, 1992, p. 150). Overall, kindergarten teachers focused on the whole child and "the active process of learning by doing. They encouraged self-expression, and helped children learn to get along, play games, sing songs, and have fun learning" (Bryant & Clifford, 1992, p. 151). By and large, these principles and activities characterized most kindergarten programs in the United States until the 1960s (Bryant & Clifford, 1992; Chervenak, 2011; Miller & Almon, 2009).

The Shift to Academic Priorities in Kindergarten

The launch of the Soviet satellite *Sputnik* also launched a slowly spreading fear in American culture. American innovation, creativity, and, ultimately, education were threatened by the Soviet's ability to reach the final frontier ahead of the United States. In order to keep America competitive and maximize American potential, a series of educational reforms focused on making changes to develop a more rigorous curriculum that would propel American students ahead of their peers in a rapidly expanding global context (DeCos, 1997; Miller & Almon, 2009; Reid, 2010). Impacts were perceptible across all grades, but the result for early childhood education meant kindergarten programs began to shift from their emphasis on play-based pedagogy to an increase in didactic instruction. Chervenak (2011) described these "didactic kindergartens" as adopting methods that were teacher driven and less play-based. Dramatic curricular changes like this were seen as necessary because emerging research was showing that early childhood education could give American students an advantage in content areas like math and science as well as have long-lasting positive impacts on children (Bryant & Clifford, 1992; Schweinhart, 2003). For example, in 1965, Head Start was an early intervention program established to meet the social, emotional, physical, and cognitive needs of disadvantaged preschool children as part of President Johnson's "Great Society" and "War on Poverty" (Head Start, 2016).

Despite these benefits, not all kindergarten teachers thought the move to a more didactic focus was in the children's best interest. Educators hoping to preserve a child-centered approach joined together during this time "to define 'developmentally appropriate practices' for young children and the purpose of kindergarten" (DeCos, 1997, p. 3). Yet contrary to this perspective,

policy makers behind the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act—known as No Child Left Behind (2001) and its Early Childhood Initiative counterpart—Good Start, Grow Smart, favored a more rigorous curriculum and high academic expectations (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). This tension between achieving curricula goals while maintaining a child-centered pedagogy led advocates to define features of developmentally appropriate practice. The following section further explains this pedagogy.

National Association for the Education of Young Children: Fostering Developmentally Appropriate Practice

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is a professional membership that works to "promote high-quality early learning for all young children, birth through age 8, by connecting early childhood practice, policy, and research" (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2017). The organization comprises nearly 60,000 individual members and more than 300 regional affiliate chapters (NAEYC, 2017). This professional organization sponsors leadership and professional development workshops, conferences, and events to support early childcare and education professionals. The National Association for the Education of Young Children also offers accreditation services for early childhood programs as a way to ensure children can receive the highest quality early care and education possible (NAEYC, 2017; Vardanyan, 2013). Finally, the organization publishes journals, magazines, books, and manuals as well as digital media developed by experts in the early childhood field that focus on developmentally appropriate practices (NAEYC, 2017). These resources help members stay current on emerging trends and on-going research they can use in their classrooms.

One of the most important contributions of the National Association for the Education of Young Children has been its attention and focus on developmentally appropriate practice. The organization first published a position statement describing these practices in 1986, and has since continued to study and advocate for children's educational rights as they relate to early childcare and education. According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children, developmentally appropriate practices are grounded in the practitioners "intentionality to respect the developmental level of children, their learning style, personal experiences, and socio-cultural backgrounds they come from" (Position Statement, 2009). The position statement reflects the belief that practitioners should take what is known about students, in terms of their developmental status, age-related characteristics, and individual preferences, to create activities, experiences with the curriculum, and social interactions that will support each child's growth (NAEYC, 1986/2009).

In the interest of young children, the organization compiled a list of 12 guiding principles early childhood educators should follow in order to remain intentional about their attitudes, pedagogy, and developmentally appropriate practices. (See Table 2, below.) In following these principles, children can learn and grow in an environment where they construct knowledge through their own actions and exploration (Charlesworth et al., 1993).

Table 2

Twelve Principles of Developmentally Appropriate Practice

1	All the domains of development and learning—physical, social, and emotional, and cognitive—are important, and they are closely interrelated. Children's development and learning in one domain influence and are influenced by what takes place in other domains.
2	Many aspects of children's learning and development follow well-documented sequences, with later abilities, skills, and knowledge building on those already acquired.
3	Development and learning proceed at varying rates from child to child, as well as at uneven rates across different areas of a child's individual functioning.
4	Development and learning result from a dynamic and continuous interaction of biological maturation and experience.
5	Early experiences have profound effects, both cumulative and delayed, on a child's development and learning; and optimal periods exist for certain types of development and learning to occur.
6	Development proceeds toward greater complexity, self-regulation, and symbolic or representational capacities.
7	Children develop best when they have secure, consistent relationships with responsive adults and opportunities for positive relationships with peers.
8	Development and learning occur in and are influenced by multiple social and cultural contexts.
9	Always mentally active in seeking to understand the world around them, children learn in a variety of ways; a wide range of teaching strategies and interactions are effective in supporting all these kinds of learning.
10	Play is an important vehicle for developing self-regulation as well as for promoting language, cognition, and social competence.
11	Development and learning advance when children are challenged to achieve at a level just beyond their current mastery, and also when they have many opportunities to practice newly acquired skills.
12	Children's experiences shape their motivation and approaches to learning, such as persistence, initiative, and flexibility; in turn, these dispositions and behaviors affect their learning and development.

Play as a Developmentally Appropriate Practice

As point 10 from Table 2 demonstrates, the National Association for the Education of Young Children characterizes play as an important developmentally appropriate practice. In their 2009 position statement on developmentally appropriate practice, the organization explained that play has been proven to help children develop self-regulation and promotes language, cognition, and social competence (NAEYC, 2009). The position statement also explains that teachers who use play as a developmentally appropriate practice take an intentional child-centered approach to teaching and learning. It also explains that research has shown that play supports the abilities and skills that underlie academic learning and can be a vehicle to promote school success (NAEYC, 2009).

Differences are apparent in classrooms that utilize developmentally appropriate versus age-inappropriate practices in kindergarten. The following section will focus on impacts these two practices have on students and teachers-alike.

Direct-Instruction versus Developmentally Appropriate Practice

Burts et al. (1990) studied the stress levels of students in kindergartens that use developmentally appropriate versus developmentally inappropriate instructional practices. Specifically, the authors defined inappropriate practices as "rote learning; abstract paper-and-pencil activities; and direct teaching of discrete skills, often presented to large groups of children" (Burts et al., 1990, p. 408). In a follow-up study, Burts et al. (1992) expanded inappropriate practices to include use of workbooks, worksheets, and academic skill-based instruction, few opportunities to move around the room and make choices, an overreliance on punishment and extrinsic reward systems, and use of standardized assessment tests. Based on

these characterizations, inappropriate practices are generally teacher-driven methods that limit student choice or exploration. They focus on what the teacher knows and what the student lacks in knowledge or experience (Miller & Almon, 2009; Patte, 2010).

In Burts et al.'s studies (1990, 1992) results indicated that children in developmentally inappropriate classrooms showed significantly more stress behaviors than peers in classrooms utilizing appropriate practices. The researchers found that, overall, children in developmentally inappropriate classes exhibited more stress, especially during transitions, waiting, and workbook/worksheet activities. Some of these stress behaviors including hand wringing, knee bouncing, attention getting, and pencil tapping (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). In 1992, Burts et al. studied how developmentally appropriate or inappropriate practices impacted students based on sex, race, and socioeconomic status (SES).

> In particular, males in direct-instruction classrooms exhibited more stress than did males in developmentally appropriate classrooms. African Americans in direct-instruction classrooms exhibited more stress than Caucasians during transition, waiting, and teacher-directed whole-group activities, whereas Caucasians exhibited more stress during group story activities. (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009, p. 47)

Another study, by Rescorla, Hyson, and Hirsh-Pasek (2001), similarly examined both the socio-emotional and academic progress of children as they transitioned from preschool to kindergarten. These middle-class children were examined on the basis of the preschools they attended, either direct-instruction or developmentally appropriate based on the *Classroom Practices Inventory* (Rescorla et al., 2001). Results suggested that attending more direct-

instruction classrooms with less emphasis on play led to students who were less creative, slightly more anxious, and less positive about school (Rescorla et al., 2001).

Lastly, Stipek, Feiler, Daniels, and Milburn (1995) studied both low-income and middle-class four to six-year olds. Like Rescorla et al. (2001), the researchers compared children who attended either developmentally appropriate or direct-instruction classrooms. However, Stipek et al. focused on achievement and motivational variables. The study found:

> Compared with children in developmentally appropriate classrooms, children from academic classrooms rated their own abilities significantly lower, had lower expectations for success on academic tasks, showed more dependency on adults for permission and approval, showed less pride in their accomplishments, and claimed to worry more about school. (as quoted in Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009, p. 48)

Further demonstrating this point, these results were the same for low-and middle-income children. Overall, this research suggested that inappropriate practices can have negative long-lasting impacts on all students regardless of their background.

The Loss of Play in Schools

In their article, "Crisis in the Kindergarten: Why children need to play in school," Miller and Almon (2009) described how kindergarten had changed over the previous 50 years. The researchers described at length the profound changes noticeable in kindergartens across the country today:

> Children now spend far more time being tested on literacy and math skills than they do learning through play and exploration, exercising their bodies, and using their

> imaginations. Many kindergartens use highly prescriptive curricula geared to new state standards and linked to standardized tests. (Miller & Almon, 2009, p. 11)

Unfortunately, these changes have transformed kindergarten into a smaller version of first or second grade and taken it further from its early childhood roots (Graue, 2010; Miller & Almon, 2009; Patte, 2010). Less time is available for "unstructured play and discovery, art and music, practicing social skills and learning to enjoy learning" (Miller & Almon, 2009, p. 11). The overall result is that students and their teachers are more stressed. Less free play or choice time means there is less opportunity to use play as stress release. Miller and Almon (2009) described this as a double-burden for students: "First, they heighten their stress levels by demanding that they master material that is often beyond their developmental level. Then they deprive children of their chief means of dealing with that stress-creative play" (p. 49). Other studies have produced similar findings on the increase of stress levels in kindergarten students due to inappropriate practice and pedagogy (Burts et al., 1990, 1992; Rescorla et al., 2001; Stipek et al., 1995).

As the previously mentioned studies demonstrated, using developmentally inappropriate practices in the classroom can increase student stress levels. It has also been well documented that stress in children negatively impacts brain development. Lupien, McEwen, Gunnar, and Heim (2009) found that chronic exposure to stress hormones, at any stage of life, has an impact on brain structures involved in cognition and mental health. This study also found that children who were exposed to poor care for long hours early in development "have an increased risk of behavior problems later in development" (Lupien et al., 2009, p. 436).

Play is Better for Children

In 2007, the American Academy of Pediatrics published a clinical report by Dr. Kenneth Ginsburg on the importance of play and healthy child development. According to Ginsburg et al. (2007), play allows children to use their creativity while they develop physically, cognitively, and emotionally. It supports healthy brain development as well as allows children to work through their fears, anxieties, and stress (Ginsburg et al., 2007). Ginsburg also stated that unstructured free play helps children develop new skills and strengthen their confidence and resiliency to future challenges. Furthermore, when play is undirected by adults, children learn how to collaborate with others, negotiate, share, problem-solve, resolve conflicts, and learn self-advocacy skills (Bergen, 2002; Fjørtoft, 2001; Ginsburg et al., 2007; Schroeder, 2007; Starling, 2011; Uren & Stagnitti, 2009). Child-directed play allows children to practice decision making and discover areas of interest, and promotes leadership skills, particularly when conducted with peers (Ginsburg et al., 2007).

With regard to academic development, Ginsburg et al. (2007) claimed: "it [play] has been shown to help children adjust to the school setting and even to enhance children's learning readiness, learning behaviors, and problem-solving skills" (p. 183). The results of Ginsburg et al.'s (2007) report strongly suggested that play in kindergarten promotes happy, healthy children.

Souto-Manning (2017) asked the critical question: Is play a privilege or a right? She challenged early childhood educators to see play as an opportunity for equity among all children in early childhood education settings. Souto-Manning posited that although the United States remains one of the only countries that has not ratified the *United Nations Rights of the Child* (1989), Article 31, which declares that play is the right of all children. Souto-Manning claimed

that when children are expected to learn passively and are denied the right to play, they are actively harmed (Souto-Manning, 2017). According to Souto-Manning, when children play and we as adults engage with them and are present, the roles of teacher and learner may become blurred and can lead to teachers learning alongside the students.

Effects of Inappropriate Practice on Teachers

Ranz-Smith (2007) captured teachers' predicament at this unique time of high academic expectations and common desire to remain developmentally appropriate practices in kindergarten:

> Teachers today, sensitive to what can be viewed as the child's way of learning, are continually engaged in a precarious balancing act. The problem involves implementing curricular goals and objectives while attempting to maintain an environment that allows for child-sponsored activity. (p. 273)

Kindergarten teachers today are likely to feel just as stressed by the use of developmentally inappropriate practices as their students. Teachers have an idea of their students' developmental levels and know that some of the practices they are being asked to use do not align with traditional principles of early childhood education (Chervenak, 2011; Lopez, 2015; Medellin, 2015; Ranz-Smith, 2007; Riley, 2012).

Many teachers in didactic kindergarten classrooms are forced to use scripted lessons to deliver instruction (Miller & Almon, 2009). These curricular programs are highly regimented and follow a prescribed daily routine. Activities, teacher interactions, and materials are literally scripted and leave little room for teachers to adapt. Teachers may feel anxiety about staying on pace or meeting the needs of students who are not staying on track (Chervenak, 2011). This type

of program is especially stressful for teachers who know students need a different approach but cannot deviate from the script because of administrative pressures (Ranz-Smith, 2007).

According to Miller and Almon (2009), public kindergarten teachers in Los Angles and New York reported the main factors working against their ability to have dramatic play, blocks, sand/water activities, and arts and crafts in their classrooms were a prescribed curriculum, lack of time, space, and funding. Another common explanation is that school administrators' perceptions of child-directed and teacher-directed activities differ from their own. These factors can contribute greatly to teacher stress. Miller and Almon (2009) reported that roughly half of teachers in a study by Asuto and LaRue-Allen (in preparation) perceived their administration as not valuing block play, art activities, dramatic play, sand/water play, and similar activities. If teachers do not have support from their administration to incorporate play, they might feel extra pressure to adopt practices they know are not developmentally appropriate for students. When this feeling is coupled with accountability measures and evaluations, kindergarten teachers report feeling a great deal of stress, anxiety, and internal conflict (Miller & Almon, 2009; Ranz-Smith, 2007).

Building on the discussion of developmentally appropriate and inappropriate practices to implement curriculum, the following section highlights how kindergarten has changed in light of widespread adoption of the Common Core State Standards. It begins with a brief description of the Common Core, its adoption, controversies, and whether it allows room for play in the curriculum. The section continues by reporting how adults, including parents, teachers, and administrators, perceive of the Common Core. It concludes by discussing the implications these perceptions may have on the extent to which play is utilized in kindergarten.

Defining the Context: Common Core and Kindergarten

The Common Core Standards are a set of "college and career-ready math and English language arts/literacy standards for kindergarten through twelfth grade," (Common Core State Standards Initiative [CCSSI], 2015). These standards have been adopted by 48 states. Given its widespread adoption, Common Core is surrounded in some controversy for a number of reasons (CCSSI, 2015).

One criticism is that the Common Core Standards amount to a national curriculum (Tienken, 2013). The perceived issue is that the federal government is dictating what students should learn. Another concern is that the standards tell teachers *how* to teach (Clarke, 2014; Roewe, 2014).

With regard to early childhood education and developmentally appropriate practice, some critics argue that Common Core curriculum is out of line with developmental milestones for young children (Clarke, 2014; Miller & Almon, 2009; Roewe, 2014). On this point in particular, the Alliance for Childhood has written:

> Current pressure to teach literacy and math skills that used to be introduced in first or second grade [have] turned kindergarten into a highly structured and regimented ordeal in which the first lesson many children learn is that they're not good enough. (Miller & Almon, 2009, p.16)

National Association for the Education of Youth and Children: Policies on Kindergarten and Common Core

To further explore the Common Core within a kindergarten context, it is important to review two policy briefs issued by the National Association for the Education of Youth and Children on the implementation of Common Core (NAEYC, 2015; NAEYC [Snow], 2012).

The first brief, "Variation in Children's Experience of Kindergarten and the Common Core," highlights three distinct structural elements that influence the way kindergarteners experience the Common Core curriculum. These elements include the duration of kindergarten (full-day vs. half day), age of student entry, and teacher preparation and training (Snow, 2012). As the brief describes, differences in these structural elements will lead to variety in how students experience the Common Core.

The second brief, "Developmentally Appropriate Practice and the Common Core State Standards," looks at the intersection of developmentally appropriate practice and the new standards. Unlike the myths that say Common Core dictates what students should learn and how teachers must present the material, this brief actually explores the National Association for the Education of Young Children's optimism regarding the new climate of standards reform. To begin, while the Common Core only presents standards for math and Language Arts, the National Association for the Education of Young Children encourages states to work on developing standards that encompass all aspects of student well-being, such as social learning, science, art, social studies, and physical education. The organization explains that the standards themselves are not inherently bad. It describes the fact that these standards can help teachers understand what students need to know and be able to do (NAEYC, 2015). The National

Association for the Education of Young Children does warn that focusing too much on rigidity of schedules can lead to inappropriate practices like drills, overreliance on workbooks, and teacher-directed learning only.

Next, the National Association for the Education of Young Children looks at the language used in Common Core. Generally, the organization believes that the language written in to the Common Core Standards complements developmentally appropriate practice since it leaves teachers to create and utilize the methods they know will work best with their own students (NAEYC, 2015). It should be noted that the Standards (CCSS, 2015) *do* mention play as a method that can help students reach benchmarks:

> The Standards define what all students are expected to know and be able to do, not how teachers should teach. For instance, the use of play with young children is not specified by the Standards, but it is welcome as a valuable activity in its own right and as a way to help students meet the expectations in this document. (p. 6)

Within the Common Core and Kindergarten debate, Hirsh-Pasek et al. (2009) suggested that play and learning can coexist: "There is room for real instruction that is playful. Play and learning are not incompatible" (p. 51). The National Association for the Education of Young Children explains that there is room for a standards-based curriculum and play together. The fact that variation is built into the Standards is both an opportunity for teachers and students to cautiously use the standards to guide kindergarten curriculum.

The literature suggests the possibility to have play within a Common Core Standards-based curriculum. However, many scholars recognize that this perspective is not widely known or acknowledged (Clarke, 2014; Miller & Almon, 2009; Roewe, 2014). The following section

reviews the literature on how parents, teachers, and administrators perceive and respond to the Common Core Standards.

Informing Adult Perceptions of Common Core

The following section presents literature that illustrates how the Common Core Standards and the legacy of past policies and reforms contribute to current parent, teacher, and administrator perceptions of kindergarten and play within the curriculum.

Concerned parents. Clarke (2014) described parental rants on Facebook, Instagram, and other social media as evidence of the frustration and mistrust many parents feel regarding the Common Core Standards and curriculum. He explained that the real issue is that many parents struggle because they are trying to translate the new curriculum, in this case, math, specifically, into something that resembles what they learned in school. Realistically, this is a Sisyphean task as the Common Core represents a drastic change in the way math is taught today (Clarke, 2014). Clarke wrote: "What many parents are grappling with is an alternative system of teaching math, hugely successful in Asia, that emphasizes comprehension over memorization" (p. 32). Clarke continued by describing what he sees as one of the fundamental misunderstandings about Common Core; that it is a curriculum as opposed to a set of standards. He addressed critics as he wrote:

> Common Core is a set of minimum standards that emphasize critical thinking and provide detailed outlines of the reading and math skills students should have mastered at each level. The idea is to help unify not how or what kids are taught, but basic, predictable levels of attainment and comprehension. (Clarke, 2014, p. 32)

Due to the concern that Common Core is a prescribed curriculum, parents, politicians, and wary citizens have made the argument that the federal government is over-extending its reach in dictating what used to be local authority to select the curriculum (Clarke, 2014; Roewe, 2014).

To gain a sense of the level of concern the public has about Common Core, one only needs to visit the Frequently Asked Questions section on the official Common Core State Standards website. Some such questions include, "Who led the development of the Common Core State Standards?" "Is adoption of the standards voluntary?" "What evidence and research were used to develop the standards?" "What do the Common Core State Standards mean for students?" "Do the standards tell teachers what to teach?" and "Are the standards developmentally appropriate for students?" (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2015). These questions suggest wide concern about who developed the Common Core Standards and hint at the fear of federal government oversight. The questions also raise concern with the validity of the standards, their impact on student experiences of learning, the role the standards will have on teacher autonomy, and Common Core's developmental appropriateness. The fact that the Common Core Standards initiative coalition wrote up this list also suggests that these concerns are widespread (Rentner & Kober, 2014).

In some parts of the country, parents have banded together to pressure lawmakers to repeal the Common Core (Parker, 2014). For example, in 2014, three states, Indiana, Oklahoma, and South Carolina, nominally decided to reject the Common Core (Ujifusa, 2015). According to one *Politico* article, South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley, captured the sentiments of a gathering of Republican women when she said, "We don't ever want to educate South Carolina children like they educate California children. We want to educate South Carolina children on South

Carolina's standards, not anyone else's standards," (quoted in Politico, 2014). Online bloggers, activists, and Facebook group pages reveal parent frustrations and grass roots efforts to overturn Common Core (Parker, 2014).

Teacher Perceptions.

The literature on teacher perceptions of the Common Core is focused on two main areas: immediate reactions and areas of concerns.

Immediate reactions: Tempered optimism. When the Common Core was first being adopted early in 2010 and 2011, many teachers displayed optimism regarding the widespread adoption of Common Core Standards (Achieve, 2011; Cheng, 2012; Editorial Projects in Education Research, 2013). At the time, the Common Core represented a shift away from the test-driven educational climate. Teachers were simultaneously excited and cautious. They were eager for an alternate solution to No Child Left Behind (NCLB), a federal policy that had resulted in a reliance on high-stakes testing and accountability measures. Due to this climate, many teachers found themselves "teaching to the test," relying on rote memorization, using scripted lessons, and feeling the same level of burnout as their students (Cheng, 2012). Fed up with this reality, teachers saw the Common Core as a much-needed change. Early in 2011, Achieve Incorporated, an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit education reform organization, commissioned a national poll to explore the public's awareness and support for the Common Core. One of the key findings gives insight into teacher perceptions: "nearly 60% have a favorable impression, while just 15% have an unfavorable impression" (Achieve Incorporated, 2011, p. 4). Furthermore, when given some background information on the standards and their goals, 80% of teachers said they favored implementing the Common Core (Achieve

Incorporated, 2011). This suggested that most teachers felt positively about adopting and implementing the new standards. However, despite these high numbers, the legacy of No Child Left Behind policy meant some skepticism was mixed in with teacher optimism (Achieve Incorporated, 2011; Cheng, 2012; Editorial Projects in Education Research, 2013). Also, it is relevant to note that Achieve Incorporated is a corporate-sponsored group, funded by some of the same groups who funded the Common Core (Gates Foundation, 2015).

In a study shortly following the early adoption of Common Core, Cheng (2012) investigated teacher perception of the new standards movement. Out of 95 teachers surveyed and interviewed from elementary, middle, and high school, Cheng (2012) found: "teachers considered the implementation of the Common Core State Standards a positive rather than a negative step in education reform (50.0% vs. 10.6%)" (p. 39). To explain why this was the case, Cheng wrote, "After all, 80% of teachers unfavorably viewed the large amount of time that students currently spend taking tests under the NCLB environment and 81.6% of teachers judged NCLB more as a negative rather than a positive step in education reform" (p. 39). According to Cheng (2012), teachers favored the new standards because they were perceived as more open-ended than the current standards. Teachers reported that the old standards were "filled with excessive 'minutia' and 'intricate things that kids need to know'" (Cheng, 2012, p. 42). Teachers also favored the Common Core because of the perceptible reduction in the number of standards. According to Cheng, one teacher explained that this change would help remedy the feeling of being constantly overwhelmed as fewer standards meant more time could be taken to explore concepts in depth. This change would also decrease the feeling of being rushed and could reduce pressure to cover a wide-range of topics in a curriculum. Cheng also found that teachers reported

they thought this reduction in standards meant they would be able to spend more time reteaching or reviewing topics, could focus more on developing critical thinking as opposed to rote memorization (as had happened in the test-prep NCLB environment), and could use creative means to make lessons and learning more relevant to students' everyday lives.

Concerns about implementation. The initial wave of teacher optimism around Common Core began to dissipate once implementation began in earnest (Hipsher, 2014; Wan, 2014). According to Wan, the Education Next poll, conducted in spring of 2014, captured a sense of growing dissatisfaction over the standards:

> Fifty-three percent of the estimated 5,000 respondents say they support the Common Core (down from 65% in 2013) while 25% oppose it (up from 13%). More startling, though, is that the percentage of teachers who oppose the Common Core tripled in 2014 to 40%-- up from 12% a year earlier. (p. 1)

By 2014, states and districts had about three or four years under Common Core. This period of time held mixed levels of implementation, often due to limited program funding, and inadequate teacher support (Clarke, 2014; Wan, 2014). Teacher perception of Common Core was greatly influenced by this spotty implementation process (Hipsher, 2014).

Hipsher (2014) conducted a qualitative multiple case study focused on educators' perspectives regarding the intersection between Common Core and professional development. The researcher interviewed 14 teachers who taught in regular and special education classrooms from a large suburban metropolitan school system. Using theme analysis of interviews, focus groups, and reflective journals, Hipsher's primary findings revolved around three themes: "educators experienced frustration over the implementation of the Common Core State

Standards, educators experienced feelings of confusion over the variety of expectations placed on them, and educators expressed the need for additional support" (pp. 61–62). These findings highlighted challenges to the implementation process. Hipsher found that most teachers reported there were "gaps or perceived inadequacies in the current professional development programs" within their districts (p. 70). Another challenge was the lack of resources available to teachers. In Hipsher's study, many teachers complained they needed to buy materials and resources for the new curriculum from their own pocket. They interpreted this as a lack of support from the school system and government. Teachers also voiced concern about misalignment they felt between the district's expectations and the daily demands of teaching the new standards. Specifically, the teachers cited lack of training with regard to implementing Common Core with diverse populations such English Language Learners (Hipsher, 2014). They thought the district's implementation timeline was unrealistic considering the amount of time it would take to modify or create curriculum to meet the new standards. Again, most teachers were frustrated with the few professional development opportunities required to, "show valuable and longer term results for teachers to invest themselves fully in the [implementation] process" (Hipsher, 2014, p. 76).

Concerns about accountability. Another theme negatively influencing teacher perceptions of Common Core is the link to accountability and teacher evaluation (Cheng, 2012; Hipsher, 2014; Wan, 2014). According to Cheng teachers feared that the new student assessment measures would still be used as a punitive tool, much like it was under No Child Left Behind (2001). Other literature cited teacher concerns that the new assessments would be used for teacher evaluations or merit-pay systems (Cheng, 2012; Roewe, 2014).

Based on initial sentiments of support from teachers, it has been surprising that teacher unions are beginning to voice their dissatisfaction with Common Core. In July 2014, at the annual American Federation of Teacher (AFT) convention, the union's leadership team announced it would offer innovation grants from $20,000 to $30,000 to state and local affiliates to critique the Common Core (Russo, 2015). Also, the New York State United Teachers (NYSUT) supported legislation against New York's implementation timeline (Politico, 2014). A more nuanced look at this reveals it was only "when the development of assessments began, and the US Department of Education's No Child Left Behind waiver process included clear requirements for evaluating teachers based partly on student test scores, that the unions began to talk" (Russo, 2015, p. 37).

Administrators

The literature on administrator perceptions of Common Core focuses on reactions, expectations, and concerns linked to Common Core implementation (Finkel, 2013; Finnan, 2014; Killion, 2012; Northwest Education, 2011; Rentner & Kober, 2014). From the literature on implementation, key themes emerged; these include: perceptions of unrealistic timelines, inadequate funding, and the need for more or different professional development.

Concern for timelines. An article in *District Administration* from November 2013 examined school and district leaders' perceptions of implementing Common Core in light of the various practical challenges involved in the process—such as adoption costs, assessment technology, and teacher training (Finkel, 2013). Finkel reported that the executive director of American Association of School Administrators (AASA), Dan Domenech, captured member concerns on costs and the proposed timeline when he said, "Our members…are saying, 'My god,

we're not ready for this. We need more time. We need to do this right'…We're not against accountability. We're not against assessment. We're just against this timeline'" (Domenech, quoted in Finkel, 2013, p. 5). Another study led by Finnan (2014) and sponsored by the American Association of School Administrators revealed more about these sentiments. Finnan surveyed 525 superintendents from 48 states regarding the planning and implementation of the Common Core Standards. One of his findings indicated concerns over the timeline, for implementation is strongly related to its link with assessments: "41.9 % of respondents say that schools in their states are not ready to implement the online assessment, and 35.9% say they lack the infrastructure to support online assessments" (Finnan, 2014, p. 5). Finally, a study by Rentner and Kober (2014) reported that 90% of district leaders cited having enough time as a challenge to implementation. This link between assessments and implementation is causing many administrators to be anxious about Common Core.

Inadequate funding. Related to concerns about successful implementation, Finnan's (2014) study revealed that nearly 70% of the respondents said that state support for materials was inadequate. Over half of the respondents received both federal and state support (52.3%) while 21.8% did not receive funds from either (Finnan, 2014). Renter and Kober (2014) discovered that of districts receiving assistance from their state education agency, one-third found the service helpful, while two-thirds found their SEA somewhat helpful. Given this limited level of support, superintendents felt they were being asked to do a lot with only a little (Finnan, 2014). The connection between implementation and funding is linked to two main areas: professional development and curricular materials. As was reviewed in the section on teacher perceptions of Common Core, administrators also recognized the need for professional development. According

to Finnan (2014), most superintendents noted that professional development needs to address how the standards are different, the new assessments they require, and how to use technology to support the curriculum.

Changes in Policy: From No Child Left Behind to Every Student Succeeds Act

President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in December 2015. Soon after, there was anticipation for what this new reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act would mean for students, teachers, state departments of education, and the nation overall. Since No Child Left Behind left a bitter taste in the mouths of most of these groups, the Every Student Succeeds Act was quickly scrutinized. For example, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD, 2015) quickly published a document comparing the Every Student Succeeds Act to No Child Left Behind. Through this document it is easy to see how Every Student Succeeds Act made changes in six key areas: expectations for standards, assessments, accountability, school improvement, teacher effectiveness, and funding. A more detailed description of the differences between No Child Left Behind and Every Student Succeeds Act continues in the following section.

Under Every Student Succeeds Act, some early learning provisions directly relate to early childhood education. One of these measures is language in the policy that authorizes a new preschool development grant program to be jointly administered by the US Department of Health and Human Services and the US Department of Education (First Five Years Fund, 2016). Another aim is to improve coordination between early childhood education and the early elementary grades. It is too soon to evaluate how this policy will be administered, though it is

clear that the intent behind Every Student Succeeds Act was for states to have more flexibility in addressing their individual needs.

Overall, Every Student Succeeds Act continues four principles that existed in early iterations of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, including No Child Left Behind. These include: (a) state articulation of what they expect students to learn, (b) schools being required to help all students meet or exceed standards, (c) using assessments regularly to measure whether states are teaching the standards, and (d) making information about schools, including assessment results, available to educators, parents, students, and their communities (Chenoweth, 2016). It is very different from No Child Left Behind in the flexibility it offers states and districts to design accountability systems to meet these four principles. Also, the Every Student Succeeds Act consciously and transparently takes measures to keep big decisions about standards, assessment, teacher evaluation, school improvement, and even funding, in the hands of states and local authorities.

Adult Perceptions of Kindergarten Today and The Role of Play

Since kindergarten today has changed due to curricular changes via the Common Core Standards and continues to be influenced by policies such as the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), it is important to review the literature on current parent, teacher, and administrator perceptions of what kindergarten is or should be. The following section discusses the literature that reviews how these distinct groups of adults have previously viewed play and continue to evolve their notions today.

Parents

In light of education's focus on high achievement, today's parents anxiously view kindergarten as a critical entry point into formal schooling for their children (Hatcher, Nuner, & Paulsel, 2012). The pressure to learn to read highlights parent expectations of success in kindergarten today (Hatcher et al., 2012; Miller & Almon, 2009; Reid, 2010). "In fact, many parents today do not seem to appreciate the value of free play and gently guided play for children's learning" (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009, p. 12). Based on this and similar ideas about academic achievement, it is important to explore parent understandings of kindergarten readiness and play.

Kindergarten readiness and play. Fisher et al. (2008) conducted two quantitative studies on parental and professional perceptions of play and its benefits. Their first study investigated mothers' beliefs in play and the frequency that their children engaged in play for learning. The second study compared professionals' versus mothers' beliefs about play. Findings showed that professionals preferred unstructured play for students while mothers preferred structured play as a means to enhance child learning (Fisher et al., 2008). The results suggested that most parents may not fully understand the benefits of child-directed, unstructured play for early academic learning. In the study, mothers were given a list of activities; they had to define whether the activities were "play" or not. Secondly, the mothers use a Likert scale to indicate whether they thought the activity was conducive to learning. The findings of the second study, describing the difference in value placed on unstructured play between experts and parents, also suggested that parents might not see the benefits of play for academic learning as readily as educators do.

Hatcher et al. (2012) also studied beliefs about kindergarten readiness as held by parents and teachers. The researchers were interested in seeing how the recent shift in preschool education from experiential, play-based programs to more academic models influenced teacher and parent perceptions of kindergarten readiness (Hatcher et al., 2012). Interviews were used as the primary method for research. The study found that most parents were anxious about whether their children would be adequately prepared to transition to kindergarten. It acknowledged that most teachers believed their preschool students would be ready for kindergarten since they focused on "rules and routines, taking turns, and communicating personal needs and feelings" (Hatcher et al., 2012, p. 3). However, interviews revealed that teachers were not sure parents shared their level of confidence in kindergarten readiness. This finding relates to the findings of Fisher et al. (2008) since it also suggests that parents and educators will have divergent perspectives on how developmental practices, like play, may impact learning. Similarly, Lopez (2015) found that parents and some teachers at a preschool program had mixed opinions about a whole child, developmental approach to curriculum because they were both influenced by national trends that emphasized more academics.

Administrators

According to Graue (2010), administrators see less formal kindergarten activities as "wasting valuable instructional time that could raise student achievement" (p. 29). According to one teacher, her principal told her she would be fired if she let her class play for more than 10 minutes per week (Miller & Almon, 2009). While this case may seem extreme, it reflects the perception teachers often hold that their administrators do not value child-centered play in kindergarten (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Miller & Almon, 2009). According to Miller and Almon,

while administrators acknowledged that play was important to kindergarten, few were able to articulate the relationship between play and learning.

Catholic Education: The Intersection of Common Core and Faith-Based Education

The conversation on Common Core has not been limited to public education. Since the development and widespread adoption of the Common Core, Catholic educators have discussed and debated how the Common Core fits in with Catholic education (McDonald, 2011). Early in 2011, an article entitled "Do Common Core Standards Have Implications for Catholic Schools?" ran in *Momentum*, a Catholic education periodical published by the National Catholic Education Association (NCEA). The article, written by Dale McDonald, PBVM, director of public policy and educational research for the NCEA provided background on Common Core, its creation, and implications for assessments, and ended by describing how private schools will be affected. McDonald (2011) said that a big problem with the Common Core Standards is that no representatives from private education were included in its development, yet private schools will be faced with repercussions and lasting effects of Common Core's widespread adoption:

> While most private schools have their own local or diocesan standards, their ability to continue to provide high-quality education for their students may be compromised as curriculum resources and professional development become aligned with the CCSSI [Common Core State Standards Initiative]. (p.66)

National Catholic Education Association Speaks Out on Common Core

The National Catholic Education Association's official position statement on Common Core was published in 2013 (NCEA, 2013). The document opens with a declaration of the mission of Catholic education as having "a long-standing commitment to academic excellence

that is rooted in the faith-based mission" (NCEA, 2013, p. 1) and goes on to explain that the Common Core Standards do not in any way compromise or contradict Catholic identity or the educational program of Catholic schools (NCEA, 2013). Each section of the statement makes clear that the NCEA aimed to address concerns parents, parishioners, and educators might have regarding the Common Core Standards. The statement uses strong language to assuage these fears and emphasizes how Catholic schools will be supported should they choose to adopt the Common Core. For example, the National Catholic Education Association (2013) wrote

> The Common Core State Standards initiative, begun in 2007, is a state-led, bipartisan effort that is not a requirement for participation in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 or any other federally-funded program, and there are no mandates for any Catholic school to follow any federal rules if they adopt the Common Core. (p. 1)

The National Catholic Education Association (2013) uses simple, direct sentences, such as, "The Common Core State Standards are not a curriculum," and "[materials] will continue to be determined by superintendents, principals and teachers" (p. 1) to convey a strong message about its approval of the Common Core. Yet, the position statement also stressed that Catholic schools are not required to adopt the new standards: "Adoption of the Common Core is voluntary; individual states, Catholic diocese, and other private schools make their own decision about whether to adopt the standards" (National Catholic Education Association, 2013, p.1). It adds that in the past, many Catholic schools have come up with or adapted state-standards to provide students with a high-quality education, and some will continue to do so in light of the Common Core (National Catholic Education Association, 2013). The position statement concludes by outlining measures the National Catholic Education Association has taken to provide support for

dioceses or schools who decide to adopt the Common Core. The most comprehensive of these is the establishment of the Common Core Catholic Identity Initiative (CCCII), which will provide resources to implement the Common Core Standards "within the culture and context of a Catholic school curriculum" (National Catholic Education Association, 2013, p. 1).

Common Core Catholic Identity Initiative

When the Catholic Common Core Identity Initiative was first established in 2010 with a group of about six members, it outlined its project goal as such:

> To develop and disseminate frameworks, guidelines, and resource guides that will assist local educators in infusing Catholic values and principles of social teaching into all subjects and integrating the Catholic worldview and culture into curriculum and instructional design using the Common Core Standards. (Ozar, 2012, slide 2)

In following benchmarks outlined in the *National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools* (2012), the Catholic Common Core Identity Initiative made it a point to help teachers and principals understand and implement a standards-based curriculum and appropriate instructional design (Ozar, 2012). The Catholic Common Core Identity Initiative was not about Catholic identity, but more so about how to teach with a Catholic identity to include the following elements in the curriculum: "catholic worldview, culture and tradition, Gospel values, church social teachings, and moral/ethical dimensions" (Ozar, 2012, slide 14). The group used the Catholic School Standards Project website as a space to house Catholic-specific Common Core resources for grades K–12. Unfortunately, little substantive resources are available to support kindergarten teachers with regard to policies or implementation on their site.

Common Core in Catholic Kindergarten Programs

The literature on the intersection of Common Core and Catholic kindergarten programs is currently lacking (Scanlan, 2006). To gain an idea about how Catholic kindergartens can or should adopt a Common Core Standards-based curriculum, it is most pertinent to review the literature available on a Catholic vision for Early Childhood education (ECE).

Researchers Frabutt and Waldron (2013) cited the recent attention Early Childhood Education has been given in politics, policy, and the media as the central reason they initiated their study to begin "mapping the landscape" (p. 5) of Catholic early childhood education in several dioceses across the United States. Utilizing a qualitative interview protocol, 15 (arch) diocesan administrators shared information regarding current practices in Catholic preschool education (Frabutt & Waldron, 2013). The study revealed that early childhood education is "already viewed as an integral part of a developmental approach to Catholic education that meets the needs of the faithful across the lifespan" (Frabutt & Waldron, 2013, p. 25). Frabutt and Waldron grouped findings according to themes such as: "curriculum, teacher qualifications, accreditation, finances, enrollment, marketing, and Catholic identity" (p. 5). To enrich the discussion of kindergarten and the integration of Common Core, the following subsections will review Frabutt and Waldron's findings of these specific areas: faith and whole-child education, parent expectations of Catholic Early Childhood Education, preschool curriculum and how these areas can provide insight into elements a Catholic Common Core kindergarten may have.

Faith as an element of "whole child" education. Frabutt and Waldron (2013) found that most preschool sites describe the Catholic faith as being woven into most aspects of the early childhood classrooms. One participant said: "We cannot profess to teach the whole child without

including the faith dimension and the spiritual development of the child and I truly believe that's what makes our programs so successful" (quoted in Frabutt & Waldron, 2013, p. 20). This sentiment highlights an emphasis in Catholic education to nurture *all* aspects of the child. Thus, in a Catholic Common Core kindergarten classroom attention should be paid to developing the cognitive, social, physical, and spiritual domains. Therefore, practices and pedagogy need to reflect a whole-child approach. Based on the literature on developmentally appropriate practice, Catholic kindergartens that adopt Common Core should be using play as part of their pedagogy.

Parent expectations of academics and developmentally appropriate practices. Other comments by the participants show why parents would choose a Catholic Early Childhood Education program over secular programs: "Parents are looking for programs that are going to provide a Catholic, caring environment that supports their most basic beliefs. They want programs that are focused academically but attentive to what is developmentally appropriate." A similar comment expressed this sentiment more succinctly, "Parents expect a developmentally appropriate program with a faith formation dimension" (Frabutt & Waldron, 2013, p. 24). It is interesting that both these quotations capture administrator perceptions of parent desires for faith, academics, and developmentally appropriate practices. Thus, a Catholic Common Core kindergarten classroom should also combine these three elements. As has been reviewed, the literature supports integrating play to enhance academic development and characterizes it as a developmentally appropriate practice (Ginsburg et al., 2007; Graue, 2010; Miller & Almon, 2009; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009; Patte, 2010; Vecchiotti, 2001). Furthermore, the Diocese of Phoenix's preamble to curriculum for Early Childhood

Education, as cited by Frabutt and Waldron (2013), iterated why play is important both from an early childhood *and* Catholic education perspective:

> Child-centered programs for young and older preschool children provide opportunities for discovery, exploration, observation, and experimentation in the manner in which young children learn best through the vehicle of play. Play is the work of the young child and is supported through standard based curriculum. With focus on the child growing in community, faith and Catholic identity are a part of daily activities that demonstrate best practice in programs for young children. (as cited in Frabutt & Waldron, 2013, p. 17)

Decisions about curriculum. In their interviews with diocesan leaders, Frabutt and Waldron (2013) noted that when it comes to selecting a curriculum for their preschool programs, participants acknowledge there is "an existing tension between the academic press[ure] and rigor of a program and a healthy balance with developmentally appropriate practice" (p. 24). Data from the interviews revealed that most archdioceses provided curriculum standards to guide early childhood programming, though these may not be the same as diocesan-wide standards (Frabutt & Waldron, 2013). However, the researchers did acknowledge the central role standards-based curriculum is taking K-12: "With Common Core Standards becoming the norm, there will likely be only greater and greater press[ure] to articulate and define the learning expectations for preschoolers" (Frabutt & Waldron, 2013, p. 25). These sentiments reflect the impact Common Core is having not only on Catholic education, but also, more interestingly, on Catholic Early Childhood education.

Conclusion

This literature review began with a deep exploration of the theoretical framework. Then it followed the shift from a play-centered philosophy to an academically focused environment in kindergarten as a result of standard reforms leading to the Common Core State Standards. It discussed literature that focused on play as a developmentally appropriate practice for the kindergarten curriculum and provided examples of stress that could come to students in classrooms that heavily relied on teacher-led didactic instruction and age-inappropriate tasks such as paper and pencil worksheets. Next, the discussion moved to describe factors that influence parent, teacher, and administrator perceptions of Common Core. Highlights included initial reactions to Common Core, followed concerns and challenges involved in implementing the new standards. This led to a review of the literature on adult understandings of kindergarten today. The chapter ended by looking at the intersection of Common Core and Catholic education. Since the literature on Common Core and Catholic kindergarten programs is lacking, the literature presented focused on Catholic Early Childhood education. These topics build a deep picture of the intersectionality between the role of play in kindergarten, adult perceptions of its role as an appropriate practice, and the context of Common Core and Catholic education.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Play has received increasing attention for its cognitive, social-emotional, and physical benefits for children (Ginsburg et al., 2007; Miller & Almon, 2009). Yet despite these benefits, many kindergarten classrooms have dramatically reduced or eliminated child-directed play while simultaneously increasing didactic instruction, further driving play out of the classroom (Cheng, 2012; Clarke, 2014; Editorial Projects in Education Research, 2013; Hipsher, 2014; Medellin, 2015; Riley, 2012; Wan, 2014). Today's parents, teachers, and administrators have the potential to change this trend. As pivotal figures in a child's education and with awareness of play's numerous benefits, these adults can advocate for a return to play as a central feature of kindergarten. To facilitate this process, research is needed to understand current parent, teacher, and administrator perceptions of play and its role in contemporary kindergarten classrooms. This study sought to address this need through the following research questions.

Research Questions

1. What are parent, teacher, and administrator perceptions of play in a Catholic kindergarten classroom?
2. How is play implemented within the classroom?
    - To what extent is it child-directed?
3. What is the relationship between teacher, administrator, and parent perceptions of play and how it is implemented in the classroom?

Study Design and Methods: A Qualitative Approach

To fully explore the research questions, a qualitative design was chosen. Merriam (2009) defined the goal of qualitative research as "*understanding the meaning people have constructed*" (emphasis in original) (p.13). This study on perceptions aligns closely with Merriam's characterization that qualitative research explores how people make sense of their world. Furthermore, Denzin and Lincoln (2005) explained that qualitative researchers study phenomena in their natural settings in an effort to interpret the meanings people bring to them. This perspective is particularly salient in exploring the second and third research questions that seek to note the relationship between perceptions of play and play's implementation in the classroom.

The Case Study

This study focused on adult perceptions of play, a complex and nebulous topic. In order to deeply explore the ways teachers, parents, and administrators conceive of play and its role in the kindergarten classroom, this study utilized a single case study design. As mentioned previously, this is both an appropriate and important methodology for addressing the research questions because this choice is supported by a *common* case rationale (Yin, 2014). In the study, the common conditions in a Catholic kindergarten program were observed for how play was implemented. According to Merriam (2009), "the case study offers a means of investigating complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon" (p. 50). Another reason the case study was an appropriate methodology for the study was due to the decision to study one case: the kindergarten program at one Catholic school. A single-case study is focused on a single unit, thus it can result in a rich and holistic account (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 1989). Merriam characterized this special feature of a case study as

particularistic. This means that the case study can focus on a particular situation, event, program, or phenomenon. To delve deeply into the case, the study also explored embedded subunits (Yin, 2014). The school site had two kindergarten and two transitional kindergarten classrooms. These four classrooms made up the subunits for the case study. Following Yin's (2014) characterization of a single-case study with embedded units such as these, the resulting design is called an *embedded* case study design. This approach is advantageous because it provides a fuller picture of the case and is more comprehensive than a holistic design (Yin, 2014). Also, according to Yin (2014) using subunits can increase the study's sensitivity and maintain the focus of inquiry.

Site Selection and Description

Table 3 contains the criteria that were used in selecting the school site for the study. These criteria were requirements the site must have in order to fully explore the research questions. They included: (a) a Catholic school, (b) established Kindergarten program, (c) located in the Los Angeles Archdiocese, (d) adopted the Common Core Standards as the basis for the curriculum, and (e) status as a double grade school, which means there are two classrooms per grade level. Table 3 is a summary while a more detailed description follows.

Table 3

Criteria for Site Selection

Criteria	Importance to Study
Catholic school	Parents as partners in education.
Kindergarten program	Two transitional kindergarten classrooms and two regular kindergarten classrooms comprise the kindergarten program at the site.
Located in Los Angeles Archdiocese	Access to the school site based on the researcher's location.
Curriculum based on Common Core Standards	Literature suggests parent, teacher, and administrator perceptions are influenced by the controversial nature of the Common Core Standards.
Double grade school (Two classrooms per grade)	Increased number of subunits allows for deeper exploration of the case. Each classroom is a new subunit. At the site, there were four subunits (two for transitional kindergarten and two for the traditional kindergarten classrooms).

Catholic School. For more background on Catholic education in the United States: in the 2015–2016 school year, approximately 1.3 million students were enrolled in Catholic elementary/middle schools (National Catholic Education Association, 2016). For the same school year, approximately 35.2 million students were enrolled in public schools for prekindergarten to eighth grade (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). This means that approximately 3.7% of all elementary/middle school students attending schools in the United States are enrolled in Catholic schools.

Selecting a Catholic school for this study was important because the research questions specifically look to investigate a Catholic kindergarten program. The primary reason a Catholic

school was important to this study is that Catholic schools uniquely place a great importance on parents and their role in their child's education. Since this study included parent perceptions alongside teacher and administrator perceptions of play, it was a conscious decision to select a site that similarly valued parents. For example, Catholic schools often require parents to complete service hours to demonstrate their investment in the community and parish. Thus, it was important to select a school founded upon a tradition of parent involvement.

Kindergarten program. Currently, most Catholic schools in the Los Angeles Archdiocese offer a kindergarten-8th grade or even transitional kindergarten-8th-grade education. Transitional kindergarten (TK) follows the same curricular standards as kindergarten. According to the California Department of Education, transitional kindergarten is the first year of a two-year kindergarten program that uses a "modified curriculum that is age and developmentally appropriate" (Halvorson, 2017). Children qualify for transitional kindergarten if they turn five between September 2 and December 2 of a given school year. This means that they do not meet the kindergarten requirement of being five by September 1 (Halvorson, 2017). Transitional kindergarten programs are part of the K–12 public school system and are intended to be aligned with the California Preschool Learning Foundations developed by the California Department of Education (Halvorson, 2017). Public schools in California are now required to offer transitional kindergarten. The site selected for this study had a transitional kindergarten program in addition to the regular kindergarten program offering. The importance of this feature to the study was that the case was enriched with two transitional kindergarten classrooms in addition to the two regular kindergarten classrooms. Transitional kindergarten and kindergarten were two important parts of the overall kindergarten program at the school site.

Los Angeles Archdiocese. For the study, it was important to select a school site located in the Los Angeles Archdiocese because the researcher was based in Los Angeles and also taught at an Archdiocesan Catholic school. This criterion was important in the interest of time and resources. It contributed to gaining access, which is fundamental to qualitative research.

Curriculum based on Common Core Standards. Selecting a school that used the Common Core Standards as a basis for the curriculum was important for the study because, when seeking to understand adult perceptions of play, it was important to do so in the context of the Common Core Standards, a currently polarizing topic in education. Also, as mentioned in the literature review in Chapter 2, the Common Core Standards do mention the possibility of using play as a strategy to support student learning. Thus, it was interesting to see how a school decided to use this information while addressing the rigorous academic expectations characteristic of the Common Core Standards.

Double grade school status. To gain the most from a single-case study design, looking at multiple subunits can help the researcher ensure a single orientation is kept throughout the study (Yin, 2014). Thus, selecting a site that had two kindergarten classrooms and two transitional kindergarten classrooms helped establish these subunits at one site. Additionally, it was important to study a school with a large population in order to increase the chances of willing parent participants.

Site for the Study: St. Catherine of Bologna School

The site selected for this study was St. Catherine of Bologna School (a pseudonym), a Catholic, Archdiocesan, elementary school located in Los Angeles. In addition to meeting the criteria outlined in Table 3, St. Catherine was selected for convenience of access. I used personal

and professional contacts to gain access to the school site. Merriam (2009) cautioned that convenience sampling without other criteria can lead to low dependability of the data. For this reason, generating a list of criteria for site selection helped ensure that St. Catherine had other attributes that made it an appropriate choice for the site of this study.

Site Description

St. Catherine's first opened in the early 1940s and served the needs of its community as a double-grade school. While most Catholic elementary schools only have one class per grade, St. Catherine's had two. This feature made St. Catherine's unique. At the time of this study, St. Catherine's school population was approximately 500 students. According to U.S. Census data, the city in which St. Catherine's was located had a predominantly Hispanic or Latino population, estimated at 74.6% in 2014 (U.S. Census, 2000). The second largest group was that of "Asian alone" residents at 11.0% (U.S. Census, 2000). White, non-Hispanic, or Latino residents made up 8.5% of the population while residents identifying as "Two or More" races reported at 3.7% in 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). These census data described the context of the city in which St. Catherine's was located. It also reflected the community that made up St. Catherine's parish and the children who attended its school.

St. Catherine's offered a transitional kindergarten through eighth-grade educational program that sought to foster academic achievement, faith development, and overall excellence in its students. These classrooms in grades transitional kindergarten–eighth grade had between 20 to 34 students each, bringing the average number of students per grade to approximately 54 students. For the 2016–2017 school year, school tuition for an in-parish family with one child was approximately $4,000. For the 2016–2017 school year, tuition for an out-of-parish family

with one child was approximately $4,500. The school employed 20 full-time classroom teachers. In each transitional kindergarten classroom and each regular kindergarten classroom, the lead teachers had one teacher's assistant from 8 a.m.-1 p.m. each day.

Pseudonym Selection

The choice to use the pseudonym "St. Catherine of Bologna" was both deliberate and purposive. St. Catherine of Bologna is the patron saint of artists. She was known for having a creative spirit and many talents ("Saint Catherine of Bologna," 2013). Though St. Catherine was a 15th-century cloistered nun, as a young girl, she spent much of her early life as a companion to Princess Margarita, daughter of the Marquis of Ferrara. As the young girls grew up in an emerging cultural center, Catherine and Margarita benefited from an education rich in literature, music, painting, and dancing ("Saint Catherine of Bologna," 2013). St. Catherine's life draws a parallel to the important function play has in kindergarten. Opportunities for creativity, self-expression, and a developing sense of agency are benefits of child-directed play. Much as St. Catherine learned through art, music, and dance, so too can children in kindergarten today.

In her book *The Seven Spiritual Weapons,* St. Catherine famously wrote: "to believe that alone we will never be able to do something truly good" is the second most important "weapon" against evil (St. Catherine of Bologna, 1998). This line reflects St. Catherine's belief that community and partnerships are of the utmost importance in bringing about good in the world. In a similar way, this study's focus on adult perceptions of play acknowledged the important role parents, teachers, and administrators had on child experiences in school. For all of these reasons, St. Catherine of Bologna was chosen as the pseudonym for the school selected as the site for this study.

Unit of Analysis

The kindergarten program at St. Catherine School served as the case for this study. This program was composed of both transitional kindergarten and traditional kindergarten classes. The individual classrooms: Transitional Kindergarten 1, Transitional Kindergarten 2, Kindergarten 1, and Kindergarten 2 were embedded subunits within the overall case. The decision to study both transitional kindergarten and kindergarten classrooms resulted from a number of considerations. First, the four classrooms together comprised the kindergarten program at St. Catherine's. Thus, in order to fully analyze this case, the study required understanding each subunit individually and in conjunction. The collaboration between the transitional kindergarten and kindergarten teachers was also important in establishing one cohesive program at St. Catherine School. While the kindergarten and transitional kindergarten teachers shared lesson plans and collaborated with regard to planning, each classroom and teacher had his or her own unique style. For this reason, it was also important to observe each classroom individually to understand how play was implemented within the classrooms as well as how each teacher's perceptions influenced individual decisions to incorporate play.

Data Sources

According to Yin (1989), case studies may be based on six different sources of evidence including documentation, archival records, interviews, direct or participant-observation, and physical artifacts. This study yielded data from the following: a demographic questionnaire for parent participants; semistructured interviews with the principal, vice-principal, and classroom teachers from the transitional kindergarten and kindergarten; classroom observations; field-notes; and textual analysis of lesson plans and school publications such as the 2016–2017 parent

handbook, student application for admission, Virtue of the Month list, principal newsletter or September 2016, and 2016–2017 school-wide behavior expectations. The idea to use triangulation is supported by Yin. In fact, when compared to other research strategies, the ability to triangulate the data contributes to the strength of a case study methodology (Yin, 1989). Below, Table 4 provides a brief description of the data sources this study draws upon.

Table 4
Data Sources

Data Source	Purpose
Demographic Questionnaire	Gathered information on parent participants including age, years affiliated with the school, sex, highest level of education, and ethnicity.
Semistructured Interviews	Primary way the study gathered data on parent, teacher, and administrator perceptions of play and its role in kindergarten.
Classroom Observations	An important way to substantiate the way perceptions contribute to the way play is implemented in the classroom. Observations took place in both kindergarten and transitional kindergarten classrooms over 10 site visits from October through December during the 2016–2017 school year.
Documents: • Sample of kindergarten and transitional kindergarten lesson plans, • 2016–2017 parent handbook, • 2016–2017 application for admission, • Virtue of the Month list, • School-wide behavior expectations, • Principal Newsletter	These additional sources of data were examined to provide a more comprehensive picture of the school history, its philosophy and approach to education. Documents were closely read and examined to understand the underlying values they reflected.

Demographic questionnaire. The demographic questionnaire for parents, available in Appendix A, aimed to gather important information from parent participants such as their age, number of years at the school, sex, highest level of education, and ethnicity. While all of these pieces of information helped provide background information about the participants, this information was also collected based on previous research. To understand why age is important, McCullough, Stroud, and Isken (2009) found that generational values exist and are "shaped by the larger culture and historical context that has informed the life of each worker" (p.79). To understand parent perceptions, noting parent age helped to understand the influence of generational values that might inform perceptions of play. To understand the influence of parent sex, it is important to recall Fisher et al.'s (2008) study comparing professionals' versus mothers' beliefs about play. Like Fisher's study, the participants for this study were all mothers. Looking at education levels followed the work of two research teams. First, Davis-Kean (2005) found that parent education was an important socioeconomic factor that contributed to child achievement. Davis-Kean found that this was the case because parent education impacted socioeconomic status, and thus family income. Secondly, in Hatcher et al. (2012), findings indicated that some difference regarding parent perceptions of kindergarten readiness did differ with regard to parent education and income levels. Asking parents to self-identify their ethnicity was also important based on the work by Burts and colleagues. According to Burts et al. (1992) children from African American and Latino backgrounds were more likely to exhibit high levels of stress in classrooms that used developmentally inappropriate practices in kindergarten, such as paper-pencil tasks, than students from other races. Since parents were important to investigating the

research questions for this study, knowing as much information about their experiences was significant to the study.

Semistructured interviews. Merriam (1998) said interviews allow the researcher to investigate experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge. Given the research questions and study's focus on perceptions of play, interviews were a particularly well-suited process for investigating perceptions. The semistructured interview specifically supports a relaxed conversation between the researcher and participant (deMarrais, 2004). According to Merriam, the semistructured interview is "guided by a set of questions and issues to be explored, but neither the exact wording nor the order of the questions is predetermined" (p.114). In anticipation of this, all interview protocols (See Appendices B, C, and D) include some follow-up questions or probes that were an important part of the process.

Classroom observations. Observations were important in addressing the second and third research questions that looked at how play was implemented as well as how adult perceptions may have influenced its implementation. Different from interviews, observations allowed the researcher to be present in the site setting and experience it first-hand (Merriam, 1998). Classroom observations also allowed the researcher to see how the students experienced their learning environment. Though children were not active participants in the study, their lived kindergarten experience was central to the study's purpose and significance. Observations made it possible to watch the students see their reactions, record their engagement, expressions, and activities in a way that interviews with their teachers, parents, and school administrators would not have allowed. From classroom observations, the researcher could witness the opportunities for child-directed learning, exploration, and play.

Documents. Documents reviewed as part of the study provided the researcher with a unique opportunity to understand and explore esteemed values of the St. Catherine community. As Merriam (1998) explained: "Documents…are usually produced for reasons other than the research at hand and therefore are not subject to the same limitations" (p. 139). In essence, when documents are reviewed, they represent an edited version of their creator. With regard to the parent handbook specifically, St. Catherine's school administration made a conscious decision to include a particular narrative of the school history, symbols, and important saints to their philosophy of education. These choices revealed the underlying assumptions and priorities that the school valued. Similarly, teacher lesson plans conveyed activities, strategies, and pedagogy the teachers believed in and found effective. For these reasons, document review was valuable to investigating the research questions.

Participants and Participant Selection

To address the research questions on administrator, teacher, and parent perceptions of play, the participants for this study included St. Catherine's school principal, vice principal, the Kindergarten 1 teacher, Kindergarten 2 teacher, Transitional Kindergarten 1 teacher, and four parents with children currently in kindergarten, Transitional Kindergarten 2 teacher declined to participate in the study. According to the Transitional Kindergarten 2 teacher, since this was her first year at the school, she did not feel like she could contribute enough to this study so declined to participate. The administrators and teachers who participated were selected by convenience and purposive sampling, as they were the faculty solely responsible for the kindergarten program.

Parent participants for the study were also selected based on convenience and purposive sampling. The choice to have parents who willingly participated in the study highlighted a factor of convenience. The purposive element for parents was that each participant had to have a child in the kindergarten program at St. Catherine's. All kindergarten and transitional kindergarten parents at St. Catherine's were invited to participate in the study via an introductory letter from the researcher sent home via the biweekly classroom folders early in October 2016. This initial letter provided background information about the researcher, including professional and educational experience (see Appendix E). It also informed parents about the purpose and significance of the study. The recruitment letter included details about what participation would entail: filling out a demographic questionnaire and participating in a 45-minute to hour-long interview. Parents were also informed of the other data sources for the study and were given an idea of the study's data collection procedure. The letter clearly stated that participation was voluntary. It stated that anyone willing to participate was assured of confidentiality. Potential participants were also informed of their opportunity to review and approve transcripts from their interviews. Finally, the letter concluded with the researcher's contact information.

A summary table of the study participants is presented below in Table 5. The table includes participant's sex, age range, and ethnicity. Teachers were also asked about their credentials. Kindergarten 1 teacher, Ms. Rosa, self-reported she had her teaching credential and bachelor's degree in Child Development. Both Kindergarten 2 and Transitional Kindergarten 1 teachers, Ms. Melissa and Ms. Nicki, declined to report whether they had a teaching credential. Transitional Kindergarten 1 teacher also declined to report her highest education level.

Table 5
Summary of Study Participants

Name	Classification	Sex	Age Range	Ethnicity	Highest Education Level
Mr. Mendoza	Principal	Male	60s	Hispanic/ Latino	Graduate degree
Mr. Ricardo	Vice Principal	Male	50s	Hispanic/ Latino	Graduate degree
Ms. Rosa	Kindergarten 1 Teacher	Female	30s	Hispanic/ Latino	Bachelor's degree
Ms. Melissa	Kindergarten 2 Teacher	Female	30s	Hispanic/ Latino	Bachelor's degree
Ms. Nicki	Transitional Kindergarten Classroom 1 Teacher	Female	50s	Hispanic/ Latino	*Did not self-report*
Jenny	Parent	Female	30s	Hispanic/ Latino	High school
Lupe	Parent	Female	30s	Hispanic/ Latino	Graduate degree
Nina	Parent	Female	40s	Hispanic/ Latino	Graduate degree
Scarlett	Parent	Female	30s	Hispanic/ Latino	Bachelor's degree

Research Process

Data collection for the study took place in three phases. With Institutional Review Board and Los Angeles Archdiocesan approval, the initial phase of data collection took place during the fall of 2016. The principal provided approval for the study at the school site after an in-person

meeting in October 2016. Once approval was granted, classroom observations began in Kindergarten 1 and Kindergarten 2 classrooms. Each observation ranged from one to three hours. During the early fall, I also began to collect and review documents for analysis including lesson plans, the 2016–2017 parent handbook, and the 2016–2017 application for admission. Later, I sent out the parent recruitment letter via the classroom communication folders. I was in touch with parents who contacted me to signal their interest in participating. From about seven parents who were interested in participating, four actually were able to sit for interviews for the study. Some challenges to interviewing these other parents included scheduling conflicts due to work, being unable to find childcare, or other family commitments.

Beginning in November 2016, I sat down with the school principal and vice principal for their interviews. On the same day, I interviewed Ms. Rosa, Kindergarten 1 teacher, and Ms. Melissa, Kindergarten 2 teacher. During November 2016, I also completed all parent interviews. Ms. Nicki, Transitional Kindergarten 2 teacher, was interviewed in December. Interviews ranged in time from about 45 minutes to an hour. I was able to develop a rapport with parent participants through email and text messaging since some expressed their preference for this quick communication method. Follow-up interviews or questions were also conducted in December 2016. Document analysis and data analysis occurred throughout the data collection period.

Observations

It is worth briefly discussing the role of the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection. Merriam (2009) cited two primary benefits from having the researcher serve as an instrument for data collection and analysis. First, as a present observer, the researcher can be responsive and adaptive to the environment. This provides for a certain degree of flexibility that

allows the researcher to become substantially immersed in the environment. Secondly, both Merriam (2009) and Yin (1989) commented on the unique ability of the researcher to understand events in real-time by noting verbal and nonverbal communication, clarifying and summarizing through interactions with the participants, and an ability to explore unusual or unanticipated responses.

One concern of having the researcher rely on observations is that an individual's subjectivities will color the experience. Though on this point, Peshkin (1988) has expressed a belief that these subjectivities "can be seen as virtuous, for it is the basis of researchers making a distinctive contribution, that one results from the unique configuration of their personal qualities joined to the data they have collected" (quoted in Merriam, 2009, p. 15).

These observations were also helpful in triangulating the data on perceptions of play that were collected from interviews with teachers, administrators, and parents. According to Yin (2014), observations can range from formal to casual in how data are collected. In a more formal manner, observational instruments can be developed as part of the case study protocol.

Early site visits allowed me to establish a rapport with the classroom teachers and aides. Subsequently, with each school visit and classroom observation, I was able to increase my status from an outsider to an insider of the classroom community. Although this process took some time, the initial visits and conversations were helpful in establishing a rapport with the classroom teachers and school community.

Observation protocol. In order to observe how play is supported and facilitated in the classroom, I developed the Classroom Observation Protocol (see Appendix F) by building on previous studies (Hyson, Hirsh-Pasek, & Rescorla, 1990; Riley, 2012; Rubin, 2001), which

focused on play and developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood education. The Classroom Observation Protocol had a header with spaces for the observer to fill in the observation number, date, classroom, focus of the observation, and start and end time. These items were useful as they kept the data organized and coherent. Much like the study by Hyson et al. (1990), observations focused on two main areas of classroom play: environment and activities. In the main body of the protocol, there were three sections for notes on the classroom environment, activities, and personal reflection. More specifically, environment and activities were broken down into subtopics that guided the observations, such as teacher interactions and movement, as respective examples. These subtopics also made it easier to focus the observations and to develop a more comprehensive picture of the kindergarten classroom.

I developed the subtopic categories based on factors that emerged from the Classroom Practices Inventory created by Hyson et al. (1990). While Hyson et al. aimed to develop a quantitative measure of developmentally appropriate practices in early childhood settings; I adapted and expanded their instrument to develop an observation protocol for this qualitative study. For environment, subtopics included: Teacher Interaction, Sound, Management, and Material. For activities, the subtopics included: Initiation, Choice, and Movement. Expanding on these categories, I also added other subtopics for both environment and activities based on early childhood theory (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998; Nicholson, 1972). For example, under "environment," I also included Materials and Space; for activities, I added Purpose and Motivation. A description of these subtopics and how they relate to the theoretical framework follows below.

Environment. According to Hyson et al. (1990), the classroom environment can be characterized by interactions the teacher has with students, the types of sounds one hears (or does not) that reflect these interactions, and techniques utilized for classroom management that reflect the teacher's philosophy or approach to early childhood teaching and learning. In their study, Hyson et al. developed factors based on these three areas. They wrote statements such as, "Teachers ask questions that encourage more than one answer"; "The sound of the environment is [NOT] characterized either by harsh noise or enforced quiet"; and "Teachers show information by smiling, touching, holding and speaking to children at their eye level throughout the day, but especially at arrival and departure" (Hyson et al., 1990, p. 482). In taking statements like these from Hyson et al.'s observations, I synthesized themes that emerged from these statements and created the labels of subtopics for my observation protocol.

Activities. With regard to classroom play activities, Hyson et al. (1990) noted, "Large group, teacher directed instruction is [NOT] used most of the time;" "Children select their own activities from among a variety of learning areas the teacher prepared;" and "Children are physically active in the classroom." Statements like these allowed me to name Initiation, Choice, and Movement as important aspects characterizing play or learning activities at a school. Below I will review how parts of the observation protocol relate to these elements of the theoretical framework and can be used to understand teacher perceptions of play in kindergarten.

A teacher or administrator's belief in how much learning should happen through discovery can be gleaned from the teacher's interaction with the student. For example, focusing upon Teacher Interaction, I noted teacher tone, physical proximity to students, and language used in teacher-student interactions (Hyson et al., 1990). These types of interactions provided data that

reflect a teacher's philosophy or belief on the extent that they support child-directed exploration and play. Likewise, who initiates play, whether teacher or student, and who directs play, also provided valuable information on the teacher's belief on learning and discovery. Finally, management or a teacher's management style, including redirection, positive reinforcement techniques, and guidance, also were suggestive of a teacher's stance on the importance of learning through child exploration (Hyson et al., 1990). For example, if a teacher encourages children to answer questions where only one right answer is expected, it creates a very different learning environment than one where open-ended questions are used and multiple answers are accepted.

In analyzing how classroom activities reflect a teacher's belief in the importance of social interactions between students and their peers, teachers, and environment, I focused on sounds I heard in the classroom and the classroom space. In particular, I noted the tone of conversations I heard, whether there was spontaneous laughter, voices of excitement, conversations among children, or perhaps enforced quiet (Hyson et al., 1990). Whether a teacher encouraged or expected any of these social interactions hinted at their philosophy of education. With regard to space, I noted where play materials were located, how they were organized, and the classroom layout, to understand how the teacher planned for interactions within the classroom environment (Hyson et al., 1990).

Finally, a number of items on the observation protocol lent themselves to understanding teacher perceptions of both the importance of child-directed exploration and learning through interactions. These included Materials, Purpose, Choice, Movement, and Motivation.

In noting the types of materials the teacher provided, their availability to students, variety offered in manipulatives or props, and whether they were open-ended or close-ended also yielded valuable information on teacher perceptions. Currently, the field of early childhood education emphasizes the use of "loose parts," or materials that can be moved, combined, taken apart, redesigned, and generally put together in multiple ways (Daly & Beloglovsky, 2016; Nicholson, 1972). As such, if a teacher provided props or loose parts, children explored concepts and enriched their play in a creative way as compared to didactic toys that only allowed for one way to play (Daly & Beloglovsky, 2016).

With regard to the play activities themselves, their purpose as envisioned by the teacher—be they constructive, exploratory, group-oriented, or didactic—offered insight into the teacher's belief in the importance of child-directed exploration and interaction with peers. Similarly, any choices the teacher provided for students, whether for activities possible, materials available, and the extent a child was allowed to direct play, also reflected teacher attitudes. The teacher's decisions on movement, such as freedom versus restriction, pacing, classroom rules and routines related were also important in understanding how teachers viewed exploration and interaction to support learning. This aspect has been ascribed to a Reggio Emilia approach to schools. For example, Loris Malaguzzi, founder of the preschool program in Reggio Emilia, Italy said, "I believe that our schools show the attempt that has been made to integrate the educational program with the organization of work and the environment so as to allow for maximum movement, interdependence, and interaction" (Malaguzzi, 1998, p. 63). Finally, the ways teachers motivate students, including strategies they used to engage students and involve them in

learning and play strongly reflected teacher perceptions on child-directed exploration and learning (Hyson et al., 1990).

Interviews

Merriam (2009) described interviews as a necessary tool that researchers may use when behaviors, feelings, or the way people interpret the world around them cannot be observed. This method was particularly salient in answering the first research question on parent, teacher, and administrator perceptions of play in kindergarten. Similarly, Yin (2014) described interviews as one of the most important sources of case study evidence.

More specifically, the interviews in this study were semistructured and lasted approximately 45 minutes to an hour. Once again, semistructured interviews were selected for the study because they allowed for some flexibility in using open-ended questions while also gathering very specific data from all respondents (Merriam, 2009). Semistructured interviews allow the researcher to ask questions in a more fluid order, effectively lowering the affective filter for the participant since the interview feels more like a natural conversation (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2014). Yin cautioned that the researcher has two important tasks during the interview process, which asks that the researcher operate with dual purpose: "(a) to follow your own line of inquiry… and (b) to ask your actual (conversational) questions in an unbiased manner that also serves the needs of your line of inquiry" (p. 110). Furthermore, Yin (2014) characterized interview questions by their ability to address each of these tasks. Level 1 questions put forth nonthreating and friendly questions while Level 2 questions focused on answering the research questions.

For the study, semistructured interviews were conducted with the principal, vice principal, Kindergarten 1, Kindergarten 2, and Transitional Kindergarten 1 classroom teachers. Four parent participants were also interviewed. All interviews were audio recorded with participant permission and transcribed.

Interview protocols. The interview questions themselves focused on four areas: personal background, curriculum design and development, defining the kindergarten program at St Catherine School, and specific questions about a "regular" school day. These questions sought to explore the curriculum design process at St. Catherine's, explore the roles of teachers, parents, and administrators in curriculum development, and investigate ways the curriculum allowed for and utilized play. Interview questions on the kindergarten program asked participants to consider aspects of kindergarten at St. Catherine School they felt most proud of. Questions about the school day asked teachers to consider what they spend most of their time on during the day. For parents, this question asked what they thought classroom time should focus on. All participants were also asked about how they would define play. This was an open-ended question aimed to gather various perspectives. The probe that helped participants with this question asked them to consider play for the five- or six-year-old child. Also important was the question regarding challenges participants considered to be standing in the way of play within the curriculum. This generated some conversation on in-school and larger societal challenges that interfere with play for children. Underlying these questions was a consideration of the theoretical framework and its emphasis on learning through interactions, child-directed discovery, and parental involvement in the child's education.

Document Review

Yin (2014) characterized documented information as a very relevant aspect of data collection in a case study. To summarize some of the strengths of this data source, Yin explained that documents provide stable, consistent data because they can be reviewed repeatedly and are unobtrusive, unlike observations. However, he also cautioned that these data sources provide unique challenges. Some of these challenges include access, issues of reporting bias, and irretrievability.

For this study, documents reviewed included a sample of lesson plans submitted by the kindergarten teachers, Ms. Rosa and Ms. Melissa, and Transitional Kindergarten 1 teacher, Ms. Nicki. Ms. Nicki also submitted a blank copy of the transitional kindergarten report card to demonstrate the learning goals and benchmarks at the transitional kindergarten grade level. School documents reviewed included the 2016–2017 parent handbook and 2016–2017 application for admission. Other school documents reviewed included the Virtue of the Month list, school-wide behavior expectations, and principal newsletter for September 2016. Collection and analysis of these documents was on-going throughout the course of the study. Lesson plans and school-wide behavior expectations were accessed through classroom teachers. The parent handbook, application for admission, Virtue of the Month list, and principal newsletter were accessed through the school website archives.

Data Analysis

Yin (2014) claimed that analyzing case study evidence is particularly difficult because the techniques to do so have not been well defined. However, he identified five general strategies, which include "playing" with the data while searching for patterns, insights, or

concepts; relying on theoretical propositions; work on the data from "ground up;" develop a case description, and examine rival explanations (Yin 2014, p.132). More specifically, techniques to analyze the data include pattern matching, explanation building, time-series analysis, logic models, and cross-case synthesis (Yin, 2014).

For this study, data were analyzed through an inductive approach. Yin (2011) characterized an inductive approach as one that allows the data to contribute to the emergence of concepts or themes. This approach is characterized by "playing" with the data to see which themes, insights, or concepts emerge after reviewing the evidence and reflecting on it. For this study, analysis occurred on an on-going basis, even as data were being collected. This process is characteristic of qualitative research (Merriam, 2009).

My initial analysis consisted of reading through the observation protocol for each classroom observation soon after it was completed. As I went through the observation protocol, I simultaneously wrote a narrative account for the observation. This narrative account was typed out on the left column of a T-chart-style template so that after I was done, I could read it over and jot down any notes in the right-hand column. After a day or two, I would continue the analysis process by rereading my personal notes and writing analytic memos from the initial side notes I had written based on what I thought was interesting or particularly relevant to the research questions. This type of analysis is sometimes known as "memo writing" (Merriam, 1998). Memo writing is part of a process that involves writing, note taking, rewriting, and revision. During the analysis process, these memos contributed to data collection and enhanced subsequent analysis throughout the other phases of data collection. According to Vogt et al. (2014), this is the heart of qualitative coding and analysis. Interviews recorded and transcribed

were also read through multiple times so I would note any interesting points, then go back and add small memos where I explained why these points were interesting or relevant to the research questions. Later, these memos from the interviews were reviewed and analyzed for new themes, or in comparison to those that emerged during analysis of the observation data. Because documents were analyzed in each phase of the data collection process, they were treated in the same way. I highlighted any interesting or important parts, then went back and wrote an analytic memo explaining why this was relevant to the research questions or other emerging themes.

Coding

To facilitate coding in a systematic and organized manner, I uploaded data as Word documents, PDF files, and sound clips to MAXQDA 12 software. MAXQDA 12 is qualitative data analysis software. The software helped me organize data into collections by participant. I was also able to use the "creative coding" feature to highlight and assign code names to all my documents. Following the inductive analysis process outlined by Hatch (2002), I read through the data and identified frames of analysis. These included big picture words or phrases that occurred commonly in multiple data sources. Next, I went through these frames and used the visual mapping tools through MAXQDA 12 to visually arrange and structure codes and themes on a blank canvas. This process allowed me to consider relationships between the domains based on relationships discovered within the frames of analysis. Generally, these are categories organized around relationships in the evidence (Hatch, 2002). Third, I assigned these domains a code.

Throughout the analysis process, I continued to read and reread the data, refining domains, and kept a record of where relationships emerged within the data by using a matrix

through the MAXQDA 12 software. After each phase of data collection, I analyzed the next wave of evidence from interviews to see if the first domains were supported or needed to be expanded, discarded, or revised in some way. According to Hatch (2002), completing on-going analysis in this way within the domains enhances exploration of the data. To take analysis further, I searched for themes across domains (Hatch, 2002). Using the MAXQDA 12 Software, I was able to visually map out the domains to show relationships within and among domains. Figure 2, below, demonstrates the initial map I created to represent codes, domains, and emerging themes. Finally, I selected excerpts, quotes, or vignettes, from the data to support each domain.

Through the analysis process, I used emergent coding in reviewing the domains. As I moved through data collection and analysis, I revisited the initial codes and saw if these were sufficient or whether they needed to be revised (Merriam, 2009). Throughout this process, I also looked to Saldaña (2009) to guide my selection of coding methods.

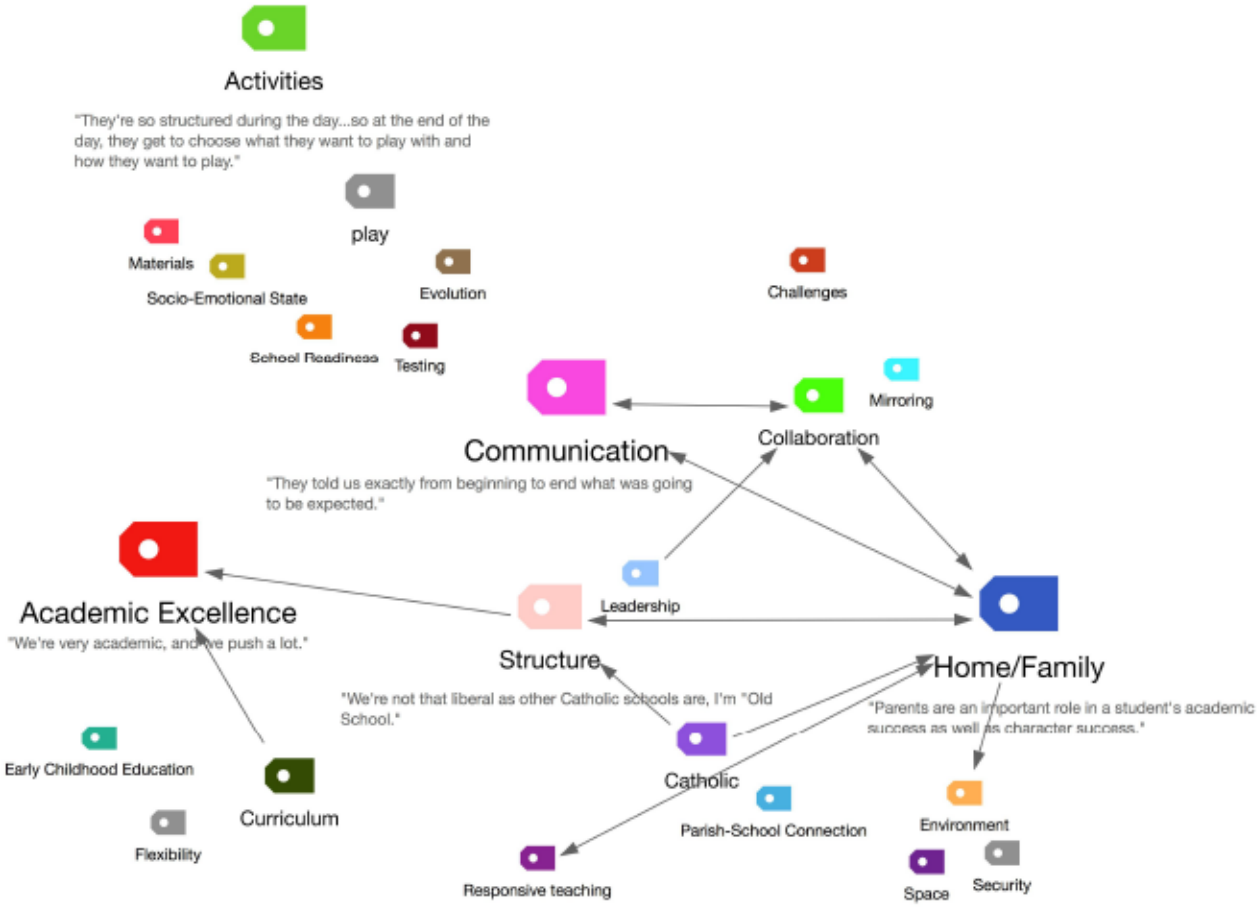

Figure 2: Emerging themes map.

Finally, when data collection and analysis was completed, I read through the emergent themes and domains, keeping the literature and theoretical framework in mind. This last step helped with planning Chapter 5 and considering how the data reflected or contradicted the literature on play in the kindergarten curriculum.

Positionality

My own experiences, position, and world-view offered the lens through which I approached this study. On a professional level, my position as a kindergarten teacher in another Catholic, Los Angeles Archdiocesan, double-grade school provided some insight into my interest

in child-directed play within the classroom. In my eight years of elementary teaching experience, I have enjoyed the past five years in kindergarten. This position has provided me with some of the most stimulating, challenging, and rewarding professional experiences. Each year, I learn more from my students about how to approach the world with open arms and a genuine curiosity for life. My interactions with my students and their parents has led me to pursue further studies in early childhood education, leadership, and ultimately, this doctoral program.

My personal experience at an affluent school heightened my attention to the challenge of balancing (parental) expectations to meet a rigorous kindergarten curriculum while remaining true to developmentally appropriate pedagogy. I witnessed my students' frustration when lessons were overly didactic, teacher-directed, or void of self-exploration. Personal study and research led me to understand that unfavorable student behaviors were not the result of intentional defiance. Many times, students who acted out were being asked to do something they were not developmentally ready to do. Otherwise their (mis)behavior stemmed from a desire to satisfy an unmet physical, social, or emotional need. The more I learned about child development, the stronger my desire became to adopt practices what would nurture student growth in all areas: cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and spiritual. I soon learned that child-directed play held numerous benefits for supporting all of these areas. My students are the reason I advocate for child-directed play. I recognize that my personal position as a play-advocate led me to view classroom practices with a particular lens.

My teacher preparation program significantly contributed to my pedagogical approach and preference for child-directed exploration. As a program graduate, I had a fellowship at a summer professional development program focused on inquiry-based science and math. This

experience significantly contributed to my desire to work with teachers to promote student-centered pedagogy. Through this experience, I became particularly fascinated by the connection between curriculum and pedagogy. I recognized how important intentionality is to both. This mindset continues to influence my approach to teaching and had a prominent impact on this study.

Another aspect of my background that I must recognize is my proclivity for Catholic education. I am the product of a K–12 Catholic education. Growing up in Catholic schools led me to develop particular expectations and understandings of parent-teacher partnerships. My own parents had close relationships with my teachers, and I grew up with this as a norm of education. The four years I spent as a public school teacher allowed me to recognize the distinct difference between parent-teacher relationships in a public educational environment compared to what I experienced in Catholic schools. I recognize that Catholic schools provide a different context for discussions of the curriculum between parents, teachers, and administrators.

These experiences influenced my positionality as a researcher and informed the way I approached the study and analyzed the data. To stay aware of these perspectives, I actively took measures to maintain reflexivity throughout the study.

Reflexivity

Throughout the data collection and analysis process, I acknowledged and reflected on my experiences as described above. To establish and maintain validity and reliability in this study, I used bracketing and self-reflexivity (Fischer, 2009). According to Fischer, bracketing refers to the researcher's ability to temporarily "shelve" personal experience, vested interests, cultural factors, assumptions, and hunches that may influence the way the data is viewed. Bracketing

allows the researcher to look back and inward in a self-aware manner such that multiple possible meanings for the data are considered. Overall, reflexivity helps facilitate an openness to experiencing and analyzing the data (Fischer, 2009).

Trustworthiness

Merriam (2009) said that ensuring validity and reliability in qualitative research means taking measures to conduct the investigation in an ethical manner. Qualitative research can approach this end through strategies that establish authenticity and trustworthiness (Merriam, 2009). In this study, triangulation was used as a strategy to increase internal validity. According to Denzin (1978), there are four types of triangulation: use of multiple methods, multiple sources of data, multiple investigators, or multiple theories to confirm emerging findings. This study capitalized on three of these four types of triangulation. First, multiple data collection methods were used—including interviews, observations, and document review. Secondly, it used multiple data sources including interview transcriptions, field notes, and lesson plans, to name a few. While the study did not use multiple investigators, it did utilize multiple theories to confirm findings. These theories included early childhood education theories, Constructivist theories, Child-directed Learning Theory, and Parental Involvement Theory. Finally, in capturing multiple perspectives on play (parent, teacher, and administrator), this study followed triangulation, as described by Denzin (1978).

Another method taken to ensure credibility was to use respondent validation (Maxwell, 2005). In this approach, feedback on emergent findings was solicited from the people interviewed (Merriam, 2009). According to Maxwell, this strategy works as an important way to decrease chances of misrepresentation while simultaneously offering an opportunity to identify

the researchers own biases. This technique is similar to what Lincoln and Guba (1985) described as "member checks." According to Lincoln and Guba, this is the most crucial technique for establishing credibility.

Prolonged engagement was also a means of further establishing the credibility of the study. Based on the fact that my fieldwork had me at the school site frequently over three or more months meant that I became a familiar figure at St. Catherine's School. My prolonged engagement also allowed me to gain a personal understanding of the school's systems, layout, and norms. The amount of time I spent at St. Catherine's enabled me to revise and refine my observations with each visit. At these visits, I was able to interact with teachers and engage with parents. In the classrooms, kindergarten and transitional kindergarten students also greeted me by name and soon felt comfortable approaching me during my classroom observations or on the playground. The time I dedicated at the school really allowed me to build trust with the community—a cornerstone of qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Secondly, through persistent observation, I was able to maintain focus and attention on the relevant characteristics of classroom observations and interviews and began to see connections to the study's research questions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In conjunction with prolonged engagement, persistent observation or "mindfulness" at the site provided depth to the observations rendered (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To facilitate this process, I used a journal to write down goals for each site visit, prior to my arrival. This strategy helped ensure that my visits were purposeful. I acknowledge that, having written goals may have narrowed my attention to only a few elements at each visit; however, I felt it was important to keep an open mind and take copious field notes at all visits to the school. In this way and with this approach, I was able to go

back and review what I saw, thought about, or heard. This allowed me to consider other points of interest throughout the field experience.

Another way I established credibility during the fieldwork and analysis process was to use peer debriefing with members of my doctoral cohort. This process allowed me to become aware of my own position toward the data at analysis as well as to present the opportunity to test and defend emerging themes I saw within the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). During peer debriefing, I was also able to consider alternative explanations or conclusions, as a type of negative case analysis. This measure further contributed to the trustworthiness of the study.

Finally, I used an audit trail as I conducted the research and began reporting findings throughout the fieldwork (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To assist me in this process, I kept careful field notes and wrote analytic memos in a reflective journal. I continually went back to previous data sources—for example those earlier observations or interviews—and continually engaged with the research questions as well as emergent themes throughout the analysis process.

Limitations

As with any research study, challenges or situations arise that contribute to limitations within the study. In order to minimize their impact on the findings, these limitations were anticipated prior to fieldwork and measures were taken to mitigate their effect. Since conducting the study, limitations are again reconsidered and discussed here.

Generalizability. This study used a case study methodology and focused on a single unit. The purpose of selecting this methodology was to understand a single unit more deeply—in this case, a single Catholic school's kindergarten program. While the goal of this study was not to generalize findings from the study across other schools with similar demographics, population

size, or location, the findings from this study do align with literature from the field. Specifically, findings supported data from other researchers and followed the trend that shows play is disappearing in kindergarten in favor of academic preparation (Chervenak, 2011; Miller & Almon, 2009; Nicolopoulou, 2010; Patte, 2010; Schroeder, 2007; Vecchiotti, 2001).

Observations. This study relied strongly on classroom observations to document how play infused the curriculum. Working within the constraints of time, and using classroom schedules to prudently select observation times, I decided to view each classroom an equal number of times for about one hour increments. These observation dates were selected to include one time each day of the week and with equal opportunities to observe each classroom in either the morning or afternoon. Lesson plans for the classrooms also took on special significance because they provided an opportunity to see the lessons, methodologies, and learning activities students were using at moments when observations were not possible. Finally, these lesson plans covered about three weeks of planning to provide an idea of how one month of classroom activity looked at the school.

Participants. Four parent participants were interviewed for the study. This number is on the lower side of the projected number of participants and can be viewed as a limitation of the study. Perhaps the data would have been more robust with an additional number of participants. However, the parents who did participate shared a range of variation in education level (high school, bachelor's, master's, and doctorate), age (20s–40s), and number of years (1st-alumna status) affiliated with the school. Of the four parents, two had children who also participated in the transitional kindergarten program at St. Catherine School and were familiar with the policies

and experiences spanning two years of kindergarten at St. Catherine School. Also, one parent identified as an alumna of the school and was able to bring this perspective to the study.

Another limitation was that all participants were female. While male parents did respond to the recruitment letter, none ended up being able to participate in the study. Thus, male perspectives are missing and would provide an opportunity to gain a more robust picture of parent perspectives on play.

Delimitations

To conduct the study in a timely and meaningful way, I, the researcher, used specific criteria to make the study manageable and significant. For example, selecting a Catholic school in a particular area of Los Angeles yielded a distinct data set. Since geography and socioeconomic factors play into each other, the site selection did lead a particular representation of adult perceptions of play in kindergarten.

Conclusion

This chapter described the methodology used for this study to understand parent, teacher, and administrator perceptions of play in a Catholic kindergarten classroom. It described why a qualitative approach was selected for the study design and how a case study methodology provided a logical choice for exploring the research questions. The chapter introduced St. Catherine of Bologna School as the site for the investigation. It highlighted that interviews, observations, and documents served as the primary data sources for the study as well as provided an explanation of the data collection procedure. Next, the chapter described the data analysis process used for the study. Data analysis was on-going throughout the collection process and utilized an inductive approach to build codes, domains, and themes. Following data analysis, the

chapter described researcher positionality, reflexivity, and trustworthiness of the study. These were important measures taken to promote reliability and validity in the study. As part of this process, the chapter described strategies used to strengthen the credibility of the study. One of these strategies included bracketing as a way to acknowledge positionality through self-reflexivity and triangulation. The chapter concluded by describing limitations and delimitations of the study. In the discussion of these terms, the researcher responded to how the limitations were mitigated and acknowledged the influence the study's delimitations on the research.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to understand parent, teacher, and administrator perceptions of play and its designation within the kindergarten curriculum. To achieve this purpose, the following research questions served as the foundation for inquiry:

1. What are parent, teacher, and administrator perceptions of play in a Catholic kindergarten classroom?
2. How is play implemented within the classroom?
    a. To what extent is it child-directed?
3. What is the relationship between teacher, administrator, and parent perceptions of play, and how it is implemented in the classroom?

The research utilized a case study methodology to investigate how parents, teachers, and administrators at a single school understood child-directed play and its role within the kindergarten curriculum. The case for this study was the kindergarten program at St. Catherine School. As a reminder, the subunits that made up the case were the Kindergarten 1 classroom, as taught by Ms. Rosa, Kindergarten 2, as taught by Ms. Melissa, Transitional Kindergarten, 1 as taught by Ms. Nicki. The Transitional Kindergarten 2 teacher declined to participate in the study.

In order to further explore these perceptions, classroom observations, personal interviews, and school publications provided the foundation for data analysis. In summary, a total of 10 classroom observations were conducted using the observation protocol. These observations lasted approximately one hour and roughly amounted to one classroom lesson. Regarding interviews, each participant was interviewed once for approximately 45 minutes to an

hour. These interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent. Overall, a total of nine interviews were conducted with participants. The principal and vice principal were the sole administrators and thus the only administrator participants for the study. Both kindergarten teachers sat for interviews, and only one of the two transitional kindergarten teachers sat for an interview. A total of three teachers were participants in the study. The other transitional kindergarten teacher declined to participate in the study. All parent participants—four total—sat for interviews. Regarding documents used for data analysis, a total of 12 documents were carefully reviewed. These included school publications as available on the school website such as the parent handbook, weekly principal newsletters, student application for admission, a list of extracurricular offerings, the school virtues, and an assigned student reading list. Additionally, three sets of weekly lesson plans for both the kindergarten and transitional kindergarten classrooms were used as documents for data analysis. Another document provided by the teachers included a blank copy of the kindergarten and transitional kindergarten report card.

The following chapter is organized thematically and presents data that illustrate the social, cultural, and ideological context of St. Catherine School. It begins with a description of the school site and introduces the administrators, teachers, and parents who volunteered to participate in the study. As was described in Chapter 3, participants in this chapter are referred to by their pseudonyms. Direct quotations from participants use these pseudonyms and are followed by the initials S. P. to indicate they are study participants. Following participant vignettes, the chapter presents four themes that emerged from the data. These themes include: (a) Tradition, Structure, and "Old School" Policies: The Ideological Base of St. Catherine School; (b) Intimacy and Communication: School Partnerships as the Foundation of St. Catherine–A Community

School; (c) Kindergarten as an Initiation into the St. Catherine School community; and (d) Being a child at St. Catherine School–Work Hard, Pray Hard, Hardly Play. It is essential to understand this context and subsequent themes that illustrate the climate at St. Catherine School in order to discuss answers the study provided to the research questions.

Description of the School Site: The Grand Tour

Following the work of Spradley (1979), I began my fieldwork at St. Catherine's school with a "grand tour," the primary purpose of which was to familiarize myself with the school campus, meet the teachers, and have a brief meeting with the school principal, Mr. Mendoza.

Upon arriving at the school, I walked around the perimeter of campus and noticed the surrounding residential neighborhood. Modest, single-family houses dating from the 1950s, lined the street on the school's eastside of campus. On the street, a few cars were parked on the school side as well as across the street. Sycamore trees noticeably provided shade and created a canopy for any cars that drove alongside the east side of the school. There was not too much foot traffic on the sidewalks; most activity came from the cars that stopped and continued their journeys at the four-way stop on the southeast corner of St. Catherine's campus. An iron security gate secured both the east and south side of campus. To the west, the church and its gated parking lot also surrounded the central playground of the school. Later I learned that the small wing behind the church parking lot housed the two transitional kindergarten (TK) classrooms and one kindergarten classroom, complete with its own outdoor play structure and lunch tables. The second kindergarten classroom was located toward the north side of campus, in a small lodge that served as the parish's Boy Scout troop meeting room. First grade through eighth grade classrooms were in the main large building, closest to the east gate of campus. As a double grade

school—meaning St. Catherine's had two classrooms for each grade—this main building was a large, single story edifice with an L configuration. The primary grades, first through fourth, were on the long hallway while fifth through eighth grade, known, as the junior high, were located on the shorter hallway.

Mr. Mendoza, the school principal, gave me this brief description as he escorted me around the school. On our walk, Mr. Mendoza also showed me some recent upgrades to the campus, including remodeled bathrooms for the students and staff. He explained that the students really felt proud of their new bathrooms and worked carefully to maintain orderliness and cleanliness. According to Mr. Mendoza, investing heavily into remodeled bathrooms demonstrated to his students and staff that they were valued and cared for.

Aside from these updates, the school building holding all classrooms, excluding kindergarten, was original from the school's first year in 1941. The side wing, with the junior high classrooms, was added in 1951. Cinderblock walls were painted bright white and the bricks along the trim were painted a deep chocolate brown. As I walked down the long hallway with Mr. Mendoza, I noticed student artwork on canvas frames in various sizes adorned the hallway. At the time, the artwork depicted *calaveras,* or skulls, with bejeweled eyes reflective of Mexican traditions celebrating *Dia de los Muertos,* the Day of the Dead, or in the Catholic tradition, All Souls and All Saint's Day. The student work, reflecting all grade levels, utilized a number of techniques and artistic styles, from simple to intricate, monochromatic to colorful, and suggested values important to the school community: respect for tradition and celebration of heritage.

Teachers

As Mr. Mendoza and I walked from the main hallway across the central blacktop and playground, we ran into Ms. Melissa, the Kindergarten 2 teacher, and her students walking out to recess. Mr. Mendoza, the school principal, made introductions. Very quickly, Ms. Melissa and I agreed to meet within the next few minutes to further discuss my study.

As Mr. Mendoza and I followed Ms. Melissa's Kindergarten 2 class, we headed toward the playground within the wing that holds the transitional kindergarten and Kindergarten 1 classrooms. This area was tucked into the northwest corner of the school grounds. I noticed this wing had a brick building with three classrooms. Outside each classroom there was a shelf unit for lunchboxes and wooden drying racks for paintings. In the center of the courtyard was a covered play structure with poured rubber on the ground to cushion young students from spills. Synthetic grass surrounded the play area and a small number of park-style benches were on the periphery of the grass for students to enjoy. While the Kindergarten 2 students began their snack time, picnic style around the play structure, on side benches, and under the slides, I followed Mr. Mendoza, school principal, into the Kindergarten 1 classroom. Before we entered, he told me that on either side of this classroom were transitional kindergarten classrooms 1 and 2.

As we walked in, it quickly became apparent that the Kindergarten 1 students were in the middle of math centers. Small groups of five students used various manipulatives and materials such as blocks, plastic teddy bears, and geometric shapes around the classroom. Some groups worked at tables while others gathered on the rug area. During this time, the Kindergarten 1 teacher, Ms. Rosa, sat at her desk while she was individually assessing students. As we entered the classroom, the students turned to Mr. Mendoza, stood up and said in unison, "Good morning

Mr. Mendoza!" Then, more than a few came up to him and circled him with a group hug. In the process, Ms. Rosa caught the class's attention and called for students to clean up their centers and line up for recess. Within minutes, the room was tidy, and Ms. Rosa dismissed the students with her teacher's assistant out to recess.

As the principal, Mr. Mendoza, left me in the Kindergarten 1 classroom with the teacher, Ms. Rosa, she and I briefly discussed my study. Since her class was out at recess time, Ms. Rosa and I walked together to meet Kindergarten 2 classroom teacher, Ms. Melissa, in the faculty lounge. As we were walking, Ms. Rosa introduced me to Ms. Nicki, the Transitional Kindergarten 1 teacher, who was going back to her classroom. Ms. Nicki did not have time to chat at that moment, so I made a note to touch base with her later. In the brief meeting that followed with the two kindergarten teachers, Ms. Rosa and Ms. Melissa, I got to know a little bit about their backgrounds and was introduced to elements of the kindergarten program at St. Catherine's. What I learned is briefly summarized below:

Kindergarten 1 teacher: Ms. Rosa. Ms. Rosa had taught kindergarten at St. Catherine's for the previous 15 years. She started teaching when the principal, Mr. Mendoza, made the change from a half-day kindergarten to a full-day program, and he needed another full-time kindergarten teacher. She had her bachelor's degree in Child Development and a California teaching credential. Ms. Rosa also attended a Catholic elementary school not too far from St. Catherine's. She said that when she was looking for a job, the feel of a Catholic school was something she was "familiar with and something I always liked" (Ms. Rosa, S. P).

In the classroom, Ms. Rosa commanded the children's respect. She spoke in a confident and firm voice as she guided students through their lessons. Her tone communicated her clear

expectations. In one phonics lesson in the classroom, she told a student, "If it is not neat, we will erase it and you will do it again." She went on to explain how to form the lowercase letter g: "Look at my printing line. Go around, then down like a monkey tail." When helping students get ready for whole group instruction on the rug, Ms. Rosa reminded them of expectations: "Criss cross applesauce, hands in your lap. Look, follow my finger. Eyes up here." Classroom observations clearly indicated that students responded to Ms. Rosa with quick compliance and often sought her approval. She affirmed their positive behavior, "There you go. That's way better."

Ms. Rosa previously taught at a child development center to preschool-age children. According to Ms. Rosa, through her experience at the center, she learned the importance movement and music have when teaching young children.

Kindergarten 2 teacher: Ms. Melissa. At the time of the study, it was Ms. Melissa's first year teaching at St. Catherine's. She had bachelor's degree, though she did not share what her major was and said that after graduation she tried to get into teaching. However, after taking a long-term substitute position, she "shifted gears" because the experience left her wondering if teaching suited her. In response, Ms. Melissa said she felt a stronger calling toward becoming a school psychologist. For about seven years, she had worked in a public school district as a behavior technician for special needs students in middle school. Last year, Ms. Melissa said she thought again about "trying her hand" at teaching, and applied to St. Catherine's for the posted kindergarten position. An alumnus of St. Catherine's, she attended the school from kindergarten through eighth grade, Ms. Melissa had eased back into the school community and said she was thrilled about working for her former fifth-grade teacher, now principal, Mr. Mendoza. She said

she was learning a lot about classroom management, planning, and teaching from her counterpart, Kindergarten 1 teacher, Ms. Rosa, and shared that she truly enjoyed her class.

In the classroom, Ms. Melissa used questions to redirect student behavior and help students decide what they should do during lessons. For example, during a math lesson she told a student who grabbed scissors for a paper and pencil task; "Do you need your scissors? What was our 1st step mister? Can we try that again? Is that how we write a 3? Let's fix our 3s." Later she told another student, "If you are not in your seats, how do I know you are done?" Ms. Melissa ensures that students stay on task by walking around the room and providing encouragement such as, "Come on. We are doing our best;" "Pick up your head. We are sitting up straight;" "Okay [student name], I told you it was fine. Come one, let's go. You're falling behind." Ms. Melissa made sure her students stayed on task during lessons and were practicing skills they would need to succeed in first grade.

Transitional Kindergarten 1 teacher: Ms. Nicki. Ms. Nicki started working at St. Catherine's when the kindergarten program was still half-day. At the time of the study, this had been nearly 15 years. Back then, Ms. Nicki worked as a daycare staff member. School principal Mr. Mendoza offered a daycare program to parents who wanted their children to remain on campus for the entire school day, since at the time, kindergarten was in half-day sessions, either AM or PM. Ms. Nicki said that she would supervise children signed up for the PM kindergarten shift in the morning then walk them over to the kindergarten classrooms. At that time, she would pick up kindergarteners from the AM session and supervise them until school was dismissed. Once the principal, Mr. Mendoza, and school board decided that there was a high demand for full-day kindergarten, Ms. Nicki was offered a position as teacher's assistant to Kindergarten 1

classroom teacher, Ms. Rosa. The two worked together until 2011, when St. Catherine's introduced the transitional kindergarten (TK) program. According to Ms. Rosa, Ms. Nicki was the natural choice to be the transitional kindergarten teacher. After so many years in kindergarten, Ms. Nicki was familiar with the kindergarten curriculum and with the expectations students needed to meet in order to have a successful transition to kindergarten. At the time of the study, Ms. Nicki had just begun to mentor the Transitional Kindergarten 2 teacher, a recent hire who was in her first year at St. Catherine's. The Transitional Kindergarten 2 teacher was hired as the school opened up a second transitional kindergarten classroom in the 2016–2017 school year. At the time of the study, there were nearly 55 students in the transitional kindergarten program.

Ms. Nicki, Transitional Kindergarten 1 teacher, used a matter-of-fact tone in her classroom interactions with students, especially when redirecting their behavior: "You can't interrupt me. I'm teaching a lesson and when you have questions, we'll talk about it after I'm finished. They don't want you to act like that in kindergarten. You have a lot of things to learn."

Administrators

Vice principal: Mr. Ricardo. As I finished meeting with the kindergarten teachers, I walked back toward the front office to gather my belongings from Mr. Mendoza's office. Once I had my things, I walked out of the principal's office and into the general reception area. Before I left, Mr. Mendoza introduced me to the vice principal, Mr. Ricardo. Mr. Ricardo just started as St. Catherine's vice principal in the 2016–2017 school year. In fact, at the time, it was his first position as an administrator. Previously, Mr. Ricardo had worked in education for about 17 years in various positions. According to his interview, Mr. Ricardo had mostly been a middle school

math and science teacher in the Los Angeles Archdiocese. However, Mr. Ricardo said he had also served as the assistant band director for a large public high school in the Los Angeles Unified School District. He had earned his master's degree in education and, through his graduate studies, met the principal, Mr. Mendoza. As the new vice principal, Mr. Ricardo said he was learning a lot about working with adults, supporting staff, and navigating the challenges that arose sometimes "out of the blue" as an administrator (Mr. Ricardo, S.P).

Principal: Mr. Mendoza. Within a day of sending Mr. Mendoza my first email, to introduce myself, describe my study, and share my interest in conducting research at his school site, the school principal responded promptly. After one follow-up email, Mr. Mendoza quickly shared that he would be happy to have his school serve as the site for my study. Two days after, I met him on St. Catherine's campus to have my first school tour.

In my interactions with Mr. Mendoza, I learned about his belief in professionalism and his deep respect for his staff. On each visit I made to the school, he had on a sharply pressed shirt, tie, and slacks. Mr. Mendoza said he showed his staff respect for their time by scheduling one day each week for teachers to participate in professional development. On this day each week, students had all of their co-curricular subjects: art, Spanish, computers, music, and physical education. Mr. Mendoza shared that this type of scheduling allowed teachers to take one day each week to meet for lesson planning with their grade-level partners, and to discuss concerns or ideas with grade level groups (transitional kindergarten teachers through second grade; third grade teachers through fifth grade, junior high—sixth, seventh, eighth). Mr. Mendoza said this scheduling meant his staff did not have to stay after school and could go home to be with their families. At one point during my fieldwork, Mr. Mendoza stayed home sick for

nearly one week with a bad sinus infection. During his time away, the school continued to function without disruption. Upon his return, Mr. Mendoza expressed his gratitude and appreciation of his staff: "That's the best compliment. That the school can run without me here. But of course, I'm glad to be back."

During my first visit, I learned that Mr. Mendoza had been at St. Catherine's for over 30 years. He entered St. Catherine's as a certified and trained public school teacher. At the time, he was working for Los Angeles Unified School District, and was hired on the spot after a phone interview with then-principal, Sister Barbara. He taught English literature in the junior high for 15 years, then was appointed vice principal, a role he served for two years. In 2003, Mr. Mendoza became the principal of St. Catherine's.

During his tenure as principal, Mr. Mendoza had taken measures to shape and grow the kindergarten program. For example, under his leadership, kindergarten changed from one half-day class to a full-day schedule. Soon after, this move drew higher demand for enrollment and he added a second kindergarten class in 2003. He hired Ms. Rosa, Kindergarten 1 teacher, for the job and recruited Ms. Nicki, Transitional Kindergarten 1 teacher, to be Ms. Rosa's assistant. Then, as soon as the Los Angeles Archdiocese began to offer information about "Junior Kindergarten," a program that was later renamed transitional kindergarten, in 2011 Principal Mendoza was quick to promote St. Catherine's as one of the first Catholic schools in the Archdiocese to offer this program. At the time of the study, in the 2016–2017 school year, Mr. Mendoza, had just opened a second transitional kindergarten classroom and had hired a new teacher for the position. This new teacher declined to participate in the study due to her personal choice.

Parents

The four female parent participants self-identified as Latina and self-reported their ages to be between 30 and 40 years old. Their educational backgrounds ranged from high school education to graduate degrees. Further information on education level and profession will be included in the vignettes below.

Parent Jenny. At the time of the study, Jenny had a daughter in kindergarten and two older children at St. Catherine's. She herself was an alumna of the school and worked as a cosmetologist. In her opinion, the school had improved a lot since she was a student. Some of the updates she noted were the new security features, curriculum activities, and teaching tools; more specifically, the use of technology. She also said that one of the reasons she sent her children to St. Catherine's was that she felt comfortable with the school staff. In fact, according to Parent Jenny, a number of teachers were fellow students when she had attended St. Catherine's. Parent Jenny self-reported her highest level of education to be a high school and some college.

Parent Lupe. Lupe's son started kindergarten at St. Catherine's in October of the year of this study. According to Parent Lupe, her son began the school year at the same Catholic school where Lupe taught science at the time of the study. After what Lupe described as a "rocky start" for her son and coming to understand that his teacher had starkly different views on classroom management from her own, she decided to enroll her son at St. Catherine's. This move followed a strong recommendation from her *compadres,* or trusted long-time friends related through baptism, whom had been happy for many years, with their children's experience at St. Catherine's. Parent Lupe said this had been a great decision and her son was so much happier in Kindergarten 1 with Ms. Rosa. Lupe said the change in her son's self-esteem had been markedly

different. While at his first school, her son would come home so frustrated that he would have a meltdown. In her view, at St. Catherine's, he was more supported. Parent Lupe admitted that her son could be challenging, especially when it came to focusing and sitting still. She said Ms. Rosa talked to her son a lot, monitored his behavior, and made sure he was listening. Parent Lupe self-reported that her highest level of education was a master's degree.

Parent Nina. At the time of the study, Nina had a son in Kindergarten 2, Ms. Melissa's class. Parent Nina's son attended transitional kindergarten at St. Catherine's, and therefore Nina was able to relate her experiences with kindergarten in the 2016–2017 school year as well as reflect on her experience with the transitional kindergarten program from the previous year. Nina said she had been very pleased with kindergarten at St. Catherine's. Her overall impression was that the school had done a wonderful job teaching her son what it meant to be respectful and have good behavior while integrating Catholic values and faith. She also reported being impressed by the academic offerings. Parent Nina said she was surprised that her son could differentiate his homework assignments by categorizing them by subject; such as phonics, math, social studies, religion, and so on. She appreciated the structure offered through St. Catherine's kindergarten program. Nina self-reported she held a PhD as clinical psychologist and practiced locally in the community.

Parent Scarlett. In the 2016–2017 school year, Parent Scarlett had two daughters at St. Catherine's: one in Kindergarten 2, with Ms. Melissa, the other in seventh grade. Parent Scarlett was a self-described working mom who admitted it was a sacrifice to send her daughters to a private school. At the same time, Parent Scarlett said she believed this sacrifice was well worth it. At the time of our interview, in November 2016, Parent Scarlett said she had already seen a lot

of growth in her kindergarten daughter since the year started. She noted that the difference at St. Catherine's was that the teachers really showed they care about their students. Like Parent Nina, Parent Scarlett's daughter had attended transitional kindergarten at St. Catherine's the previous year. Parent Scarlett said she believed this made it dramatically easier for her daughter to transition to kindergarten. Scarlett shared her perspectives on both the transitional kindergarten and kindergarten program at St. Catherine's. Parent Scarlett self-reported that she had a bachelor's degree, but she did not specify her field.

These short vignettes about the participants provide background information and necessary context. The details participants shared about their experiences and connections with St. Catherine's provide insight into the community encountered at the school site. The next section presents the themes and domains that emerged from the data collected. These themes are organized in a way that orients the reader with the priorities and beliefs of the St. Catherine community.

Presentation of Themes and Domains

Using an inductive process, data analysis yielded the emergence of four themes and their domains, which characterized St. Catherine School. These themes captured the values, practices, and beliefs of the school community. The first theme, "Tradition, Structure, and 'Old School' Policies'" reflected the ideological base of St. Catherine. This particular theme highlighted the importance of Catholic history and institution as reflected in administrator, parent, and teacher beliefs that contributed to a common school ideology. The second theme, "Intimacy and Communication" captured the essence of relationships within the St. Catherine community. This theme used the concept of a Community School to describe how St. Catherine's suffused unity

among its members. Thirdly, the theme, "Kindergarten as an Initiation" focused on elements of the Kindergarten program—including both transitional kindergarten and traditional kindergarten classrooms—that made kindergarten at St. Catherine an access point into the school community. Finally, the fourth and last theme, "Being a Child at St. Catherine School: Work Hard, Pray Hard, Hardly Play" presented what it was like to be a child in kindergarten at St. Catherine by describing the classroom experience. These four themes and their domains are described in further detail in the remainder of the chapter. They are outlined below:

1. Tradition, Structure, and "Old School" Policies: The Ideological Base of St. Catherine School
    a) Catholic Foundations: Valuing Tradition and Hierarchy,
    b) Interconnectivity of Rules, Structure, and Respect,
    c) Academic Excellence,
    d) Defining Play
2. Intimacy and Communication: School Partnerships as the Foundation of St. Catherine–A Community School
    a) St. Catherine School as a Community School
    b) Accessibility and Communication
    c) "Homegrown" Teachers
    d) Parish and School: A Symbiotic Relationship
3. Kindergarten as an Initiation into the St. Catherine School community
    a) Transitional Kindergarten: The New Entry Point
    b) Behavior and Socialization: "That's Okay. You're Okay."

c) Reinforcing Values of Excellence: Symbols and Rituals

4. Being a Child at St. Catherine School–Work Hard, Pray Hard, Hardly Play
    a) Objectives and Student Learning Expectations: "What will I Learn?"
    b) "Stop Playing. We're learning."

Theme One: Tradition, Structure, and "Old School" Policies: The Ideological Base of St. Catherine School

The first theme emerged consistently across interviews, observations, and document analysis of school publications. It was significant that parents, administrators, and teachers alike expressed similar ideas about the importance of structure at their school and an affinity for "old school" policies or practices. It became clear that this ideological common ground allowed the school to function seamlessly across classrooms and partnerships within the community.

Catholic Foundations: Valuing Tradition and Hierarchy

The social fabric of St. Catherine was bound tightly by tradition and grounded in the practice of the Catholic faith. In addition to weekly school masses, teaching the Catechism, and adopting a Code of Conduct for parents and students alike, the school reflected and modeled itself on the institution, establishment, and practices of the Catholic Church.

Attending a weekly school mass is a common practice in Catholic schools around the Los Angeles Archdiocese. St. Catherine's tradition was slightly different in that students had to attend mass in a formal dress uniform. According to the parent-student handbook, the school mass uniforms appropriate for boys included dress pants, white collared shirt, and a tie for all boys in transitional kindergarten through eighth grade. Girls had to wear jumpers or skirts with a white blouse and saddle shoes or loafers. The handbook went into further detail regarding hair

accessories, sock length, and outwear for school mass as well. As a further requirement, the dress uniform description stated: "St. Catherine students are expected to be neatly dressed during the school day. This includes having shirt and blouses tucked in and hair combed." The paragraph continued by saying that "fad-style haircuts" were not permitted and included a list of unacceptable haircut options. For girls, the handbook states that hair should be "neatly styled and away from eyes." In closing the description ended in all caps: "WE RESERVE THE RIGHT TO SEND ANYONE HOME WHO COMES TO SCHOOL INAPPROPRIATELY DRESSED." The combination of living the Catholic faith by attending Mass combined with the importance of a specific dress code demonstrated one of the ways St. Catherine cultivated its school environment.

Indeed, the mission statement of St. Catherine's School highlights the goals and philosophy the school used as the foundation for teaching and learning. Included in the parent handbook (2016), part of the mission states:

> In our community, we strive for the education of Catholic values and faith that promote faithfulness and stewardship. St. Catherine is also committed to…maintaining an environment that provides an academic program designed to develop the diverse learning abilities of each child. (p. 5)

As are clear, Catholic values were central to achieving the school's mission and fostering the unique environment in which St. Catherine's was built. When parents and students signed their agreement of the policies outlined in the parent handbook, they contributed their support and belief in the underlying values contained in those policies.

Personal interviews with parents also revealed that the Catholic faith and values were an important factor in selecting St. Catherine for their family. Parent Nina said:

> We wanted to merge our Catholic faith with education...I've got nothing against public education, in terms of the educational part, but the behavioral part…I just wanted to make sure that our son had a good opportunity to intermingle with the Catholic faith. (Parent Nina, S.P)

Parent Nina continued by describing one thing she appreciated about the school curriculum was how deeply religion was embedded into it: "Part of what I like as well is that with his religion class, it's a good way to…merge the faith…learning more of the prayers that I think are important to us (Parent Nina, S.P.). When Parent Scarlett was asked what led to her decision to enroll her children at the school, she simply stated, "I like the fact that it is a Catholic school" (Parent Scarlett, S.P.).

Another value borrowed from the Catholic Church is the idea of hierarchy within the organization. According to Canon Law of Catholic Church there is a distinct organizational structure that holds the Pope at as the head of the church, and then under him in ranking order are cardinals, archbishops, bishops, priests, and deacons (Coriden, Green & Heintschel, 1985). St. Catherine's school shared a similar hierarchical tree in how teachers and grade levels were structured. St. Catherine's had the principal, Mr. Mendoza, at the top of the organizational structure and under him was Mr. Ricardo, the vice principal. Then there were department heads for the distinct grade levels: transitional kindergarten through second grade, third through fifth grade, and sixth through eighth grade. Within each dyad of teachers, one served as the mentor or lead teacher. For example, in both interviews with the Kindergarten 1 and Kindergarten 2

classroom teachers, Ms. Rosa and Ms. Melissa described their relationship working together in this way. As a first-year teacher, Ms. Melissa, Kindergarten 2 teacher, said she was very appreciative of the guidance Ms. Rosa provided her as a mentor. Kindergarten 1 teacher, Ms. Rosa, said Principal Mendoza explained to her that it was her duty to ensure Ms. Melissa's classroom was equal to her own:

> He told me to make sure that I'm mentoring this new teacher and kind of really giving her everything that she needs, making sure that our classes are identical. I don't know if you noticed…we do the best to make sure that our classes are identical. The thing is, coming from being in a big school and a double school, you run into the problems of comparison. (Ms. Melissa, S.P.)

Similarly, Transitional Kindergarten 1 teacher, Ms. Nicki, described her role this year as a mentor for the newly hired Transitional Kindergarten 2 teacher. Ms. Rosa remarked on their similar situation: "The one [teacher] in the small Transitional Kindergarten class is new here also. She's new in this school, so Ms. Nicki is doing the same with her-giving her everything that she needs" (Ms. Rosa, S.P.).

Classroom observations also revealed that just as teachers were expected to follow the hierarchical model of organization, so too were students in their classroom. Students were quick to follow their teachers as they moved through lessons. The teachers set the pace for the lessons and moved students along through them. Any child that drifted from the task was immediately redirected back to the lesson objective through verbal cues and reminders. Kindergarten 2 teacher, Ms. Melissa used phrases such as: "Where is teacher? Eyes on teacher. Pick up your head, we're sitting up straight." While Kindergarten 1 teacher, Ms. Rosa, also cued her students:

"Remember, eyes on me. Follow my finger." Students learned their role was to follow their leader. In the classroom, this meant to follow their teacher; in the same way, teachers followed their mentors, department chairs, and administrators.

The way tradition and hierarchy go together was also revealed in discussions about behavior, rules, and respect at St. Catherine. Data showed that respect was highly valorized among participants. Interviews captured a discussion of "structure" within the school as a means of promoting Catholic values and education.

Interconnectivity of Rules, Structure, and Respect

Among parents, a desire for teaching the children to be respectful both in and out of the classroom, was presented in a number of interviews. As Parent Nina stated, "I just wanted him to…understand, well, appropriate play and appropriate boundaries in playing and things like that." Nina further expressed her impression for how her son had thus far grown in his understanding of such boundaries and expectations. In fact, Parent Nina said that one of the highlights of the school was that "kids are held accountable for their behavior" (Parent Nina, S.P.). She went on to explain that meeting appropriate behavior expectations contributed to the academic or cognitive development as well: "behavior is really important in terms of just setting up the mindset to learn" (Parent Nina, S.P.).

Walking into the classrooms, I noticed a posted list of Student Behavior Expectations. These expectations were for all students in the primary grade level; that is, for students in transitional kindergarten through second grade. There were five rules. Of those that reflected the importance of structure and respect were rules #1: Raise hands at all times; # 2: Respect all property; and #4: Keep hands, feet, and materials to self. Ms. Rosa, Kindergarten 1 teacher,

described the department level process to develop these rules. She said the transitional kindergarten through second-grade teachers felt it was important to be consistent in their expectations of student behavior, and thus they adopted these rules as a way to instill respect in students.

Another way the community at St. Catherine endorsed respect was through a desire for "structure." Parent Nina said, "I personally prefer more structured approach, especially at this age, where kids really know…that the behavior is enforced" (Parent Nina, S.P.). School principal, Mr. Mendoza also described the structured approach his teachers took with the kindergarten students. He emphasized that this was one of the distinguishing features of St. Catherine's: "I think my teachers are very structured. What I've seen at other schools…they're more easy-going. My teachers are tough for [the kindergarteners] being little, but it's part of the structure here at the school" (Mr. Mendoza, S.P.). In Mr. Mendoza's opinion, parents sent their children to St. Catherine's for this very reason: "I mean, parents send their children here because they consider us still 'old school' policies.'" When asked to describe what he meant by "old school," school principal, Mr. Mendoza explained, "Students still walk in lines into their classrooms, and they understand they have to be quiet in lines. When administrators or priests walk in, they stand up for them…I've noticed at other schools they're doing away with all of that" (Mr. Mendoza, S.P.).

This particular sentiment, of clinging to "old school" policies suggested a deep respect for tradition. In fact, walking in lines and rising for authority figures, reflected the routine and ritual as was observed in the school masses. Mr. Mendoza saw this as boiling down to a single

point: "It's a lot of respect, and we teach them a lot of that and among themselves" (Mr. Mendoza, S.P.).

Teachers and parents alike expressed feeling this respect in their relationships with each other, the administration, and as a value they were actively cultivating in students. Parent Lupe, a kindergarten parent and a teacher at another local Catholic school, distinguished St. Catherine's community as being "very nice to students…all really well-behaved" (Parent Lupe, S.P). In her estimation, the teachers at St. Catherine's were professionals. The level of respect Parent Lupe had for her son's teacher was evident in how she spoke about Ms. Rosa, the Kindergarten 1 teacher: "Ms. Rosa is amazing, you know, she texts right away if there's a problem. At the same time, I know she has to discipline him, but she didn't demean him…so I'm really happy" (Parent Lupe, S.P.).

Parent Scarlett, another kindergarten mom, perceived of this respect between teacher and student when she saw her daughter approach Ms. Melissa at the Halloween festival to ask if she could have permission to get out of line and greet her mom. Scarlett said:

> Right there, that shows that trust and respect has been built…it just shows. You can tell by the interaction…I'm not here at the school all the time, but I can just [tell] by that little act, of the fact that the kids are wanting to stay with the teacher and around her, and they listen to her…[it] shows me that the teacher has not only established trust and respect, but there's genuine care for the children. (Parent Scarlett, S.P.)

Teachers also indicated that they had respectful interactions with parents. Ms. Nicki, Transitional Kindergarten 1 teacher, said this is even true of her interactions with prospective parents: "I do my best to be a welcoming person and I'm never rude to the parents. I'm always

polite, and some of them come on very strong and then I try to calm them down" (Ms. Nicki, S.P.). Ms. Rosa, Kindergarten 1 teacher, similarly described her respectful interactions with parents. When I asked her to describe the parents at St. Catherine's she said

> [they were], very supportive. They're very supportive and I've really never ever had a problem with parents. They've all been pretty good. I've been teaching kindergarten for so long that I kind of already have a reputation here, so it's very…it's pretty smooth. (Ms. Rosa, S.P.)

Even though it was Kindergarten 2 teacher, Ms. Melissa's first year teaching at St. Catherine's in the 2016–2017 school year, she expressed the same sentiments on parents as Ms. Rosa, Kindergarten 1 teacher. Ms. Melissa said, "Everyone's friendly. Everyone knows everyone. Even the parents--like, you'll still see them and they'll still say 'hi.' It's just that sense of community actually…it's warm and welcoming" (Ms. Melissa, S.P.). Ms. Melissa's words capture the essence of St. Catherine's and the sense of community. In many ways, the reason there was so much agreement or equilibrium between the adults at St. Catherine's was that they each ascribed to the same value system. The school community's underlying commitment to respectful interactions was based on faith, common values, and was ultimately an expression of their shared ideology. This common ideology carried with it rules about social expectations, personal responsibility, and attitudes toward authority.

Academic Excellence: "It's kind of like 1st grade"

Parents, teachers, and school administrators each answered that academic preparation was a top highlight of St. Catherine's kindergarten program. Ms. Rosa said that this is what makes kindergarten really stand out:

> Well, we're very academic, and we push a lot—language arts – I think we really thrive in language arts. And then as much as we are academic, and that's something that we've always…promoted, that we're a very academic kinder. Because that seems what everyone's thirsty for. Do you know what I mean? Parents are like, "Push them. Push them." (Ms. Rosa, S.P.)

Ms. Rosa's remarks indicate that she was proud of her school's academic reputation. When I asked her about the "outside pressure" her words suggested, she responded that she herself did not feel pressure since the parents got what they wanted out of kindergarten:

> Everyone's pretty happy with what we do. But pressure? No, not necessarily. It's because when they bring them here, that's one thing that we say, we're very academic and that's one thing we've always been. It's a little bit kind of like first grade. So when they come here, that's what they're expecting, and I think they always feel that we deliver. I've never been pressured or talk to, made to feel like I'm not delivering; that's never happened to me. It hasn't happened to me yet. (Ms. Rosa, S.P.)

Though she was a first-year teacher, Ms. Melissa also described academics as a highlight of St. Catherine's: "The highlights? Very academics based. I've noticed that" (Ms. Melissa, S.P.). Transitional kindergarten teacher Ms. Nicki said the academic piece is what prospective parents liked the most when they walked around her classroom: "The academic part, yeah, they like that. They're [students] learning…instead of playing all day. Yeah, I've heard a lot of things like in public schools, they say that they don't learn as much as they do in private schools" (Ms. Nicki, S.P.).

Parents echoed a similar preference for academic growth when asked what their expectations were for their child's kindergarten experience at St. Catherine's. Parent Jenny, a mother with one current kindergartener and older children who had gone through kindergarten at St. Catherine's said,

> I do like they're reading early on. I do like the basic fundamentals that they're taught. What I've seen with my previous children is the growth, the curiosity into reading more, which I love. Their vocabulary has expanded; they're using bigger words. They are making sense of certain situations. They're rationalizing more, their comprehension…and understanding of things in general. (Parent Jenny, S.P.)

In her opinion, Parent Jenny would not like to change or adjust anything in the kindergarten curriculum. She liked how it worked for her children.

Parent Nina described how her son, who attended transitional kindergarten and now kindergarten at the school, did with tests, quizzes, and school assessments:

> Well, I think it's a good start. They're going to have tests later on, so I think even in Transitional Kindergarten they had…a quiz or a test. And I think anytime is a good time to kind of start the expectation. I mean, it's necessary, it's good for them to kind of know, and as for parents too, because it doesn't really seem they're [children] very distraught, like 'Oh, I'm going to have a test,' it's more like 'just something I'm going to do.' (Parent Nina, S.P.)

Parent Nina appreciated that kindergarten and transitional kindergarten prepared students for their future academic journey as she acknowledged assessments were part of the academic preparation of the school. Like Parent Jenny, Parent Nina was asked if she would like to change

or alter anything in the kindergarten program at St. Catherine's and she also had a similar response: "No, honestly, I'd say no. I like the way the program is run" (Parent Nina, S.P.). In her interview, Parent Scarlett had a similar response with regard to academic reputation of the school:

> All the way around, I feel that St. Catherine's is actually a really good school. They are very much with the academics. As far as kindergarten wise, I think they're right "on par." My daughter's excelling, so definitely academics is good…Overall, I think they're a very good school. (Parent Scarlett, S.P.)

For parents, St. Catherine's academic focus distinguished it among other schools. Generally, parent participants also expressed satisfaction with the transitional kindergarten and kindergarten program expectations and outcomes.

Out of the 10 classroom observations, nine were of academic lessons. During these lessons, teachers followed a very structured approach to achieving objectives. This aligned with overall community emphasis on structure. All lessons observed had teachers leading the activity, and students responding or participating based on the teacher's directions. Throughout the lessons, the teachers ensured all students stayed on task through verbal redirection. Students who did not stay with the lesson or got distracted were given notice and were told they would lose a chance to participate in "Free Time," at the end of the day. This was highly motivating and the classes persisted in their studies.

Theme Two: Intimacy and Communication: School Partnerships as the Foundation of St. Catherine—A Community School

St. Catherine's as a Community School

According to the Coalition for Community Schools, a "community school" is both a physical place as well as set of partnerships between the school and its community resources (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2017). It provides children with a quality education, develops youth in a community, provides families with support, engages the larger community, and enhances all aspects of the surrounding community. The partnerships observed between parents and teachers, school and parish, and teachers with their community demonstrated St. Catherine's appreciation of its members. The collaboration described by parents, teachers, administrators, and parishioners was an example of how the school served a larger function within the community. More than just educating students, the school served as a hub for families. The community was reflected in the student artwork displayed, the backgrounds of the teachers, the high number of alumni who sent their children to the school or worked there themselves, and in the values the curriculum cultivated in students.

The St. Catherine's school community lived out this definition of a Community School through the partnerships between parents and teachers, the strong link between parish and school, and in how teachers fit within the community. The section focuses on three areas: accessibility and communication between parents and teachers, how service hours link the parish-school connection, and how "homegrown" teachers reflect the school's commitment to community. Finally, the section closes with an introduction of how St. Catherine's reflected the concept of a Community School.

Accessibility and Communication

From teacher and parent interviews, one of the biggest themes that emerged was communication. The teachers explained that one of the reasons that they felt supported by parents was that they were in constant communication. Both Ms. Rosa and Ms. Melissa said they stayed in touch with parents through text messages. Ms. Rosa explained:

> I tell them [parents] since Back to School night, "You can email me, but I'm not an email person." I mean I'll look at it, but not as quick as a text. And then I do not always give out my private number, but with these little [children]…I spend more time with them, sometimes more, than their parents might spend with them. Also with them being so young, I just know, if I were a mom and my child was in kindergarten, to be able to text my child's teacher and just ask [about] something that's concerning me…I feel they should be able to contact me whenever they need to. (Ms. Rosa, S.P.)

The words of Ms. Rosa, Kindergarten 1 teacher, conveyed the deep care she had for her students and their parents. It is also clear that she strongly believed in quick communication and in being accessible to her students' parents. When asked about whether parents were respectful of this access, Ms. Rosa said, "They're pretty good about it. In fact, the ones that I text with the most are the ones that I don't see, but that's also what I like about it too" (Ms. Rosa, S.P.). She told me about a little boy in her class that gets dropped off early at morning day care and stays late into the evening at afternoon daycare:

> We communicate through text a lot which is helpful because they're not here to always hear announcements, and to see things, or to see what's going on. There are times where maybe he gets an "owie" in the yard, and I don't want them to pick him up from daycare

> and be surprised. And even though the nurse can call, it's more personal coming from me since I'm the one he's with, so I'll text them, "This happened today. I just don't want you to be surprised when you get here." So text message just makes everything so much quicker and easier. (Ms. Rosa, S.P.).

Parent Scarlett, a mom with a daughter in Kindergarten 2, Ms. Melissa's class, described her own experience:

> I asked [the teacher], "Is there any issue? Are you having issues with her?" She's like, "No, not at all." So I mean, they're [teachers] really good. If there's an issue, they do contact us…I don't have that constant interaction with the teacher, but I do know that they will contact me if there is an issue. (Parent Scarlett, S.P.)

When I asked Parent Scarlett to describe her expectations of the teacher this year, she referred to the importance of communication. She said, "If there is any type of issues, I expect communication – big time on the communication part. I mean so far, the teacher, she's been doing a great job, so I mean there's really nothing that I feel she's lacking" (Parent Scarlett, S.P.). Parent Scarlett was pleased with Ms. Melissa's level of communication and believed in Ms. Melissa's commitment to staying in contact should the need arise. Her words conveyed the trust and faith she had in Ms. Melissa. Similarly, Parent Lupe said her expectation of the teacher this year included, "communication and to work together for his [her son's] betterment" (Parent Lupe, S.P.). Like Parent Scarlett, Parent Lupe felt she was already getting that from her son's teacher. To that end, she said, "If there's a problem, she lets me know right away, and we discuss it and we both talk to him, so I feel like we're a team and I think that's important" (Parent Lupe, S.P.).

As much as parents and teachers communicated with each other, the principal also sent out biweekly newsletters to parents. In reviewing two of these letters, Mr. Mendoza followed a scripted pattern in his letters. These included themes such as Catholic identity, announcements, and the status of fundraisers, policy changes, and reminders of important dates. For example, in his newsletter on September 12, Principal Mendoza shared the news that the former vice principal would not be returning for the 2016–2017 school year, and that Mr. Ricardo had accepted the position as the new vice principal.

Additionally, in the parent handbook, parents were reminded of their responsibility to attend school meetings and events including: "parent conferences, Back to School night, Open House, Virtus Parent Training, Scheduled Parent-Teacher Meetings, Grade Level Meetings, 1st Communion Sacramental Journey meeting" (2016, p. 8). The school trusted that parents would attend, as it was their responsibility and duty. The school clearly stated this expectation in writing so parents would be aware. To ensure parents took this seriously, the handbook included a note saying that parents who did not attend the required meetings would be fined $50. This direct communication was also part of the "structure" many parent participants described in their interviews. Expectations of them were clear and communicated in various formats: at presentations, written in the handbook, and through teacher/principal newsletters.

The level of intimacy characteristic of communication between teachers and parents was the foundation for strong partnerships central to St. Catherine's school community. As has been demonstrated, parents cited the communication with their child's teacher as one of the highlights of kindergarten at St. Catherine's. For example, Parent Jenny, an alumnus who sent her children to St. Catherine's said that one of the reasons she felt comfortable at the school, even if it was to

address a concern, was the environment and sense of community. "I'm familiar with the staff…it's not a personal familiarity, but I do feel that they do hear me when I voice a concern. The teachers are easy to talk to. When you have concerns, they do listen" (Parent Jenny, S.P.). This quotation reflected the value parents shared as active participants in their children's education. It also demonstrates parent feelings of being welcomed to approach teachers and dialogue with them.

In understanding how to support students at home, parents and teachers expressed their agreement that communication was key. Parent Lupe, said:

> I really like that everything is mapped out for you during the week; what homework is due, [or] special [extracurricular activities] …They [teachers] give them [kindergarten students] a form that is due for the week, so you know what to expect. (Parent Lupe, S.P.)

In Nina's interview, I learned that all kindergarten parents attended a single Back to School night meeting as a group, regardless of their child's classroom assignment. Ms. Melissa and Ms. Rosa presented as a team for this meeting. Their combined presence conveyed that the two classrooms were as one. Ms. Rosa and Ms. Melissa followed the same curriculum, routines, and expectations. Parent Nina explained:

> Because there's two kindergarten classrooms, and they run exactly the same, they just had one meeting for all of us [parents] and they told us exactly from beginning to end what was going to be expected in terms of testing and grades, behavior…how they handle all of that. (Parent Nina, S.P.)

She also shared that the teachers made it clear that parents would be involved in supporting their child's learning at home: "At the beginning of the year, we were told that…they would have

homework every day, the amount of homework, and [that] the homework is directly related to what they've learned during the day…we're kept informed of everything. It's so structured. I really like that" (Parent Nina, S.P.). Nina's son was in transitional kindergarten at St. Catherine School last year; Nina said that the level of communication about assignments in kindergarten was consistent with her previous experience of homework in transitional Kindergarten.

From a teacher's perspective, Ms. Rosa said, "I always tell them [parents], 'If the kids have homework, you have homework.' (Ms. Rosa, S.P.). This quote makes her expectations of parent involvement clear. It also shows that she sees the child's success in completing homework as a shared responsibility of their parents. Ms. Rosa also said that she makes it a point to give parents the resources and support they will need to help their child succeed with homework:

> I always tell them, "I'm giving you the tools that you need so you can assist them at home." It's never going to be [for parents], "I don't know what they need to know." You're always going to know what they need to know. (Ms. Rosa, S.P.)

As input from parents and teachers has shown, communication was the linchpin to building successful partnerships. Ultimately, both groups depended upon and relied on the other to support students in kindergarten. Their words also conveyed the regard parents and teachers had for each other. This partnership was built upon the values of respect, tradition, and academic excellence as success they are lived out at St. Catherine's. Communication made it possible.

Parent support at home. Another important aspect of the partnership between parents and teachers was the perception parents had of their responsibility to support their children at home. As the data above demonstrated, teachers made efforts to communicate with parents and

to be available via text messaging in addition to other traditional forms of communication like parent-teacher conferences and informal meetings before or after school.

A review of the homework materials from teachers showed a weekly letter to parents and homework calendar for them to be aware of assignments, assessments, and due dates. This information supported the claim of Kindergarten 1 teacher, Ms. Rosa, that she gave parents "all the tools" they needed to help their children with homework at home. Likewise, the school published materials such as the Supplemental Reading List for the 2016–2017 school year online as a way to let parents know which books their children would need as part of their literacy program. Another way the school helped parents was by providing online access to student grades via an online platform called GRADELINK. Both teachers and the school administration communicated frequently to parents often utilizing technology and outlets that met the needs St. Catherine parents.

In the classrooms, student work was posted on bulletin boards as was information about what students were studying in each content area. At the time of the study, both kindergarten classrooms had several student samples of the pumpkin life cycle they had completed in a science lesson. Another board had a bar graph with the number of teeth student had lost to reinforce math concepts as well as celebrate a childhood milestone. Student paintings used colors such as brown, red, yellow, and orange to demonstrate their appreciation of the fall season. According to Transitional Kindergarten 1 teacher, Ms. Nicki, parents often remarked, "'Oh my gosh! It's so beautiful in here and colorful…' They see this warmth and coziness… welcoming everyone here" (Ms. Nicki, S.P.).

At St. Catherine's, parents shared that they helped their kindergarten children with homework each night. Parent Nina, for example, said this expectation was directly communicated to parents both at Back to School night and in the parent handbook. like their children, parents followed the teachers' directions unquestioningly. Parent Scarlett explained that even though she is a single mom and is not always able to help her daughter with homework in the evenings, she would get up early to review with her daughter before she dropped her off at school in the morning.

Only one instance in the study displayed some parent resistance to classroom practices. Transitional Kindergarten 1 teacher, Ms. Nicki, described how, three years previously, a few of the transitional kindergarten parents complained about the homework policy: "They [parents] were saying they [Transitional Kindergarten students] were too young- 'They can't have homework, it's just too much for them'" (Ms. Nicki, S.P.). At Back to School Night, Ms. Nicki said she told parents up front that there would be homework:

> I would have to tell them, you know, 'The children can do this, you'll see.' And some of them [Transitional Kindergarten students] couldn't even hold the pencil or write their name…and by the end of the school year, the parents are thanking me, saying 'Oh my goodness, Ms. Nicki, she's learned so much.' They have, like, no faith that they [the Transitional Kindergarten students] can do that. (Ms. Nicki, S.P.)

When I asked Ms. Nicki to describe the homework, she said it was two worksheets each night: one for math and one for language arts. Ms. Nicki said typically the homework would take about 20 minutes for students to complete with parent help. Though parents thought this was too much, remembering that transitional kindergarten students range in age from three and a half to

four years old, Ms. Nicki's description demonstrates that the parents eventually came around and even expressed their gratitude based how much their children had learned.

In their interviews, parents generally expressed their satisfaction with kindergarten at St. Catherine. Like their children, parents complied with school and teacher expectations. In other words, parents demonstrated their trust and respect for the teacher as an authority figure that knew best. The study revealed that many parents had also attended Catholic schools, some even at St. Catherine's, and they were cooperative in fulfilling their duties as part of the parent-teacher partnership. The narrative—that teachers and the school know best—was consistently upheld.

"Homegrown" Teachers

Another way the school demonstrated the importance of community was by the number of "homegrown" teachers, as Principal Mendoza put it. These teachers were former students who graduated and returned once more. Mr. Mendoza himself said four of his former students were now teachers at St. Catherine's. Kindergarten 2 teacher, Ms. Melissa, was one such teacher. Principal Mendoza said, "I like to focus on my alumni. Their heart is set for the school. This is *their* school, and they put up more" (Mr. Mendoza, S.P.). Vice principal Mr. Ricardo also described this commitment from teachers as a prominent feature of the school:

> We're so active every day, even on a slow day. This may be bold, with respect of course, even on a slow day at our school, it's another school's high-functioning day. So we're very active throughout the day. Take this week, for example. We had the Halloween Festival on Monday, and it was huge. Then we had Mass yesterday. Along with that, we have a sporting event. Our football program…is doing very well this season, so they are beginning their playoff season this weekend. Even after school, we have a cheer squad.

> We have our dance team. In a couple of weeks, we have our basketball programs. That would be active. So, we're very active. (Mr. Ricardo, S.P.)

When I asked vice principal Mr. Ricardo what he thought allowed St. Catherine's to be so "active" or high functioning, he answered that it was the school faculty. "And among the faculty, we have a lot who were students here, so they do take pride in the school's tradition and they keep that; it's ongoing" (Mr. Ricardo, S.P.). This spirit and drive to continue the school's tradition seems to capture what the principal, Mr. Mendoza, meant about his alumni "put[ting] up more."

Ms. Melissa described what it meant to be an alumna working at her alma mater. She said:

> I came here, so I just knew everyone. I just felt at home, and so then there was an opening. I applied. I interviewed, and I got it. I was telling my friends. I'm like, "I started here, and here I am again." I really, really enjoy it. (Ms. Melissa, S.P.).

In addition to feeling comfortable with the school, Ms. Melissa said she enjoyed turning to her former teachers—now colleagues—for advice and guidance. As a first-year teacher, she felt, "very, very supported." She described her experience: "Like I said, everyone's very helpful. When I came in and sat in my classroom, [other teachers said], 'Oh, if you need anything like borders [for bulletin boards], I have everything.' They were just very, very helpful" (Ms. Melissa, S.P.).

Parent Jenny, also a St. Catherine's alumna, chose to send her children there because of the high number of well-respected veteran teachers and the alumni who had returned to work at the school. In her own words, Parent Jenny said: "I felt very comfortable with knowing the basis

of the curriculum and I've seen that [a] majority of the staff were fellow students of mine, so I felt that my children [would] be safer here" (Parent Jenny, S.P.).

Parent Jenny's belief in St. Catherine's was part of what made the school a thriving community. Her sentiments were reflected both by other alumni who also sent their children there, and by alumni, like Kindergarten 2 teacher, Ms. Melissa, who returned to teach and work at the school. Indeed, the "homegrown" teachers and returning alumni parents were a significant part of the school's continued reproduction of values and traditions that made St. Catherine's a true Community School.

Parish and School: A Symbiotic Relationship

The interview with Parent Nina led to further investigation of the theme related to partnerships between parish and school. When asked what she would tell prospective parents looking to send their children to St. Catherine's, Parent Nina said a strong feature she would promote would be: "Definitely… the communication part of it… There really is a good sense that you belong to a community, so even between the church and the school…there's a lot of communication [on] what's going to be happening" (Parent Nina, S.P.).

Parent Lupe also shared that families were required to attend mass at least monthly on Sundays. In Principal Mendoza's school newsletter on September 12, 2016, he reminded parents that Mass attendance was required: "It is the obligation of parents to take their child/children to Mass every Sunday" (p. 3). He continued by reminding parents that each month there would be a school mass and parents needed to review the Celebration Schedule document, as it included a list of the required School Mass dates.

As part of their commitment to the school, parents were required to complete 35 hours of service to the school. Ten of those had to be at the parish fiesta—a large fundraiser for the church and school. In addition to providing volunteers for the Church ministries, having parents participate in volunteer hours for the parish and the school strengthened the connection between the two. At the time of the study, the school had recently put on the Halloween festival for students. Vice principal Mr. Ricardo, described how parents, especially those in kindergarten and transitional kindergarten, were involved:

> [They were] involved preparing the booths, food booths, helping prepare their children for their Halloween parade, and…there for the teachers. Of course, when you mix sugary foods with little ones, you do need a lot of adult supervision. The parents are very supportive. (Mr. Ricardo, S.P.).

Principal Mendoza described how the growing demand for kindergarten and transitional kindergarten had led him to ask the rectory for more classroom space, so he asked if he could use the scout house for one of the kindergarten classrooms. The parish agreed, and Ms. Rosa, current Kindergarten 1 teacher, first occupied that space when the full-day kindergarten program was established. "When I first moved in there, it looked like a dungeon. It wasn't used for anything. It was very dirty, and dark, and dreary, and I had to transform it over the summer into a classroom" (Ms. Rosa, S.P.). Ms. Rosa's description of how she transformed the scout house into a bright, welcoming classroom is also an example of how the school and parish fuel each other's growth.

In fact, parents in the study said they chose St. Catherine's specifically because their Catholic faith was important. Parent Nina: "We wanted to merge our Catholic faith with

education…I just wanted to make sure that our son had a good opportunity to intermingle with the Catholic faith" (Parent Nina, S.P.). The church at St. Catherine's brought in families and students. In turn, the parish was sustained by and had grown by same school families. To borrow an analogy from biology, parish and school existed in a symbiotic relationship, mutually sustaining and benefitting from the other.

Theme Three: Kindergarten as an Initiation into the St. Catherine School Community

The community at St. Catherine's was unified in its commitment to student success. For most students and parents, their initiation into the St. Catherine's community began when their children participated in the kindergarten program. The following section describes how the kindergarten program at St. Catherine's, including both transitional kindergarten (TK) and kindergarten, began a family's initiation into the community and culture. It describes why transitional kindergarten had replaced traditional kindergarten as an entry point into the St. Catherine's community, looks at school-wide behavior policies and their influence on how children are socialized in kindergarten, and discusses some symbols and rituals that were part of the initiation process.

Transitional Kindergarten: The New Entry Point

From the time kindergarten was offered at St. Catherine's in 1980 until only six years ago, in 2011, most students and their families had become part of the school community when their children enrolled in kindergarten. Indeed, the evolution of kindergarten at St. Catherine's followed a path similar to other public schools and many Catholic schools in the Los Angeles Archdiocese. Many schools have expanded their K–eighth-grade offering to include transitional kindergarten (TK), a program that used the same academic standards as a traditional kindergarten

curriculum, but catered to students who do not meet the school's age eligibility requirement for kindergarten when the school year begins. At St. Catherine's, to qualify for kindergarten in the 2016–2017 school year, applicants had to turn five by the first day of school, August 21, 2016. On the school application, it stated that students applying for transitional kindergarten needed to be three and a half by the same date. Thus, students may be as young as three and a half when they entered transitional kindergarten at St. Catherine's.

Ms. Rosa, Kindergarten 1 teacher, described the influence of transitional kindergarten in two prominent ways; first, it significantly affected kindergarten admissions at St. Catherine's and second, she claimed she was able teach more content to her students based on the high number who previously attended transitional kindergarten at St. Catherine. Ms. Rosa said:

> This [2016–2017] is the first year with two Transitional Kindergartens. We've always been one TK [Transitional Kindergarten], two Kinders [Kindergarten classrooms], but the demand for [Transitional Kindergarten] is growing. But it's also because now, that's the entry point of school. It's not Kindergarten anymore. The numbers [of applicants] that TK [Transitional Kindergarten] has is the number that we used to have…Now, we're [Kindergarten] not the entry point anymore. (Ms. Rosa, S.P.)

As Ms. Rosa explained, the demand for transitional kindergarten had grown steadily.

Parents preferred to enroll their children in transitional kindergarten at St. Catherine's because students who completed transitional kindergarten at the school did not have to take the entrance test for kindergarten admission. They were automatically promoted to kindergarten unless the led transitional kindergarten teacher 1, Ms. Nicki, had major concerns. Whenever Ms. Nicki had any doubts, she said she consulted with Ms. Rosa, Kindergarten 1 teacher, and

together they decided if the student was ready for kindergarten or whether the student needed to have another year of transitional kindergarten. At the time of the study, Ms. Nicki had 30 students. Her counterpart in the Transitional Kindergarten 2 classroom also had 30 students. In Ms. Nicki's class, 13.3% of students were three year olds.

Ms. Nicki explained some of the differences between transitional kindergarten and kindergarten. In her opinion, transitional kindergarten was simply, "a slower pace of Kindergarten" (Ms. Nicki, S.P.). The academic standards she used were the same as those used for kindergarten. However, the difference was that she felt she had more flexibility with regard to pacing. Ms. Nicki said she incorporated more early childhood methodologies and practices such as weekly dramatic play, longer daily naps, exploratory hands-on materials, and more direct instruction to teach children how to be successful students.

Behavior and Socialization in Kindergarten: "That's Okay. You're Okay."

Given the importance of student behavior to the values encouraged at St. Catherine's school, the following section presents how behavior and socialization were taught in transitional kindergarten and kindergarten. From a child's perspective, students were learning what was "okay" and what was "not okay" in terms of their behavior and how to please their teachers by demonstrating appropriate behavior.

Walking into both the kindergarten and transitional kindergarten classrooms, each classroom had the same poster of Student Behavior Expectations. These classrooms also had the monthly school virtues posted. When I asked Ms. Rosa, Kindergarten 1 teacher, about these items, she said that they were designed to ensure consistency with regard to behavior expectations for students.

The behavior expectations for the primary grade level, which included transitional kindergarten through second grade were:

1. Raise your hand at all times.
2. Respect all property.
3. Stay in your seat.
4. Keep your hands, feet, and all materials to yourself.
5. No talking in class.

These expectations were very direct, clear and communicated how students needed to behave in the classroom.

Field notes from one observation in Kindergarten 1 convey classroom management and behavior expectations. Ms. Rosa began the phonics lesson by telling the class, "Calm your bodies." The class settled in as they gathered in the center of the rug. To redirect some students, Ms. Rosa said, "What are you doing? Sit on your bottom." The students who were sitting on their knees changed their sitting position to comply. Just before continuing, Ms. Rosa got the attention of a few students. She said, "[Student 1], I'm moving you back on green [from the green/yellow/red face behavior chart]. [Student 2], I'm moving you to red. You will lose your free time later if you don't participate." She continued the lesson: "Everybody, eyes on the letter G, Gordo Gorilla, /G/ /G/." Students understood what they are supposed to do and knew what consequences were if they did not do the right thing; chant the lesson when directed or lose "free play" time at the end of the day.

In Kindergarten 2, Ms. Melissa also used the Green/Yellow/Red Stoplight-like behavior chart Ms. Rosa referred to. For management on the rug, Ms. Melissa said, "I like how [Student 3]

is sitting." Like Ms. Rosa, Ms. Melissa had her Green/Yellow/Red management chart posted, but all students were on green at the time of the observation. For redirection, Ms. Melissa said, "Oh, [Student 4], sitting please." I noticed that frequently, Ms. Melissa used "please" with her commands to students; as in "[Student 5], no talking please." In a separate example, during a math lesson, she told a student, "Come on [Student 6], you are not paying attention." She redirected this student by bringing the student back to attention. To another student trying to get out of his seat, she said "[Student 7], uh, uh, No." Ms. Melissa was on top of her students, keenly aware of their behavior, participation, and on-task behaviors.

During lessons in both kindergarten classrooms, students primarily sat in their seats or on the rug at the front of the classroom. Both teachers held students to the posted behavior expectations through their directions, tone of voice, and physical position during lessons. The teachers guided and facilitated the activity while students, though engaged, followed the teacher's lead. Students did the best they could to adhere to these expectations. Though, being five and six years old, students were not always successful at sitting still and not talking to their friends. As was presented, both kindergarten teachers, Ms. Rosa and Ms. Melissa, used frequent, firm redirection to guide students back toward adherence of the behavior expectations.

When asked what she thought most of her time is spent on, Transitional Kindergarten 1 teacher, Ms. Nicki, answered that she thought most of her day was spent teaching students proper classroom behavior. In her words, this included: focusing on the board, looking at the teacher, taking turns listening and speaking, and not interrupting the teacher during lessons. Ms. Nicki believed it was her job to get the students ready, in terms of behavior, for kindergarten. She said:

> I use Ms. Rosa's name a lot [to make a point] and Miss Melissa's too. And I tell them [Transitional Kindergarten students], I go, 'They don't want you to act like that in Kindergarten. You have a lot of things to learn,' and so it's just reminding them every day. (Ms. Nicki, S.P.)

Like Transitional Kindergarten 1 teacher Ms. Nicki, both kindergarten teachers Ms. Rosa and Ms. Melissa, expressed they felt strongly that it was their job to get students ready for the next grade, especially with regard to behavior. It was significant that the kindergarten and transitional kindergarten teachers described a big part of their job as socializing students to adopt and carryout behavior reflective of values deemed integral to the St. Catherine community. When I asked Ms. Rosa if these behavior expectations were new and if she had been around to develop them, she explained that they had "been around forever" (Ms. Rosa, S.P.). She also said that the primary grade level department, meaning transitional kindergarten through second-grade teachers, had worked together to develop these rules.

Admittedly, Kindergarten 1 teacher, Ms. Rosa, did say that she realized these expectations may seem challenging to enforce in kindergarten and that realistically, she was not going to write up a student for talking a few times a day. However, she explained, if she was having trouble with a particular student, she communicated this challenge to the parents, even if it were via text message to set up a phone call. To encourage students to follow through on the behavior expectations, Ms. Rosa put them in a time-out and explained what it was they must do if they were not behaving. For example, she told a student, "You're going to have to sit down and have some time off from free time if you don't start following directions" (Ms. Rosa, S.P.). She said that usually, this worked because children love their free time, or open play, at the end

of the day and they never want to miss it. She also shared that she was a big believer in follow through because, at this age, children know how to manipulate adults to get their way. In her experience, she said, "If students know that the teacher or adult is bluffing, the students will think, 'I'm not going to do what you said, because you're not going to do what you told me you're going to do'" (Ms. Rosa, S.P.). Once students learned that she did follow through, some were surprised after they found themselves in a short time-out. During that time out, she spoke to the student and reminded them: "Whose fault is it? What's the reason you have to sit down for a while?" (Ms. Rosa, S.P.). Ms. Rosa also emphasized that she made sure students know they must follow the behavior expectations when they were with any teacher at the school, especially for music, computers, and the other co-curricular classes. Ms. Rosa said, "I always make sure that they [students] know that she's [her teaching assistant] an equal to me, and they need to treat her exactly the same way" (Ms. Rosa, S.P.). In this way, St. Catherine students are taught to respect adults, regardless of their position. Thus, St. Catherine's youngest students, those in transitional kindergarten and kindergarten are socialized to learn their place and to respect their elders.

Reinforcing Values of Excellence: Symbols and Rituals of St. Catherine's School

One notable ritual of St. Catherine's kindergarten was kindergarten graduation at the end of the school year. This was a big event as it signaled that the initiation of the kindergarten students was complete. As part of this celebration, there was a school mass as a presentation in front of the community. According to the parent handbook, highlights of the celebration included: a graduation gown for each child, cake and refreshments, and panorama photo of the class. Parents, teachers, and families celebrated their children's growth and the fact that they were on their way toward other graduations down the road. Other schools did not have

kindergarten graduations anymore, but the tradition remained strong at St. Catherine's. It meant a lot to the community to celebrate the event each year.

One of the most visible symbols all around the campus and daily life was the image of the school medal. It was on the school uniform cardigans, vests, and shirts as well as student planners, in the hallways, and on plaques around the school. The parent handbook explained why the symbols in the medal were selected and their significance to the values the school embraced for its school community.

On the front of the medal was an image of St. Catherine. She held a cross in her hand as a symbol of salvation in Christ and in her left hand a bible that represented how she reminded followers to use the Gospel as a guide for how the faithful should live. The medal also had the Latin phrase, "*Ora et labora*," or "Pray and Work," as the school motto. Additionally, the phrase "*Caritas et Scientia*," which the school translated as "Love and Learning," encircled the school medal. These symbols demonstrated the importance of faith, work, and learning to the St. Catherine community. As the behavior expectations show, the reproduction of dominant social rules occurred on daily basis. Parents and teachers worked in concert to reproduce the same social structures they followed as students and continued to follow as adults and in their children as they cultivated a preference for consensus.

Theme Four: Being a Child at St. Catherine School—Work Hard, Pray Hard, Hardly Play

The following section describes how the kindergarten program exemplified the school motto, "pray and work," and generally provided insight into what transitional kindergarten and kindergarten students did during a regular school day. For this section, lesson plans and classroom observations were closely examined. Finally, of most importance to the research

questions guiding this study, it concludes by presenting how play was implemented in the kindergarten at St. Catherine's.

Routine Day: "Did we finish everything? Yes. So we get free time."

A routine day for both kindergarten and transitional kindergarten students began at 8 a.m. with Morning Prayer held outside in the schoolyard. The whole school gathered at this time for a general assembly, to pray and share daily announcements. Kindergarten and transitional kindergarten parents were invited to stay with their children for the time and walk with the children to their classrooms afterward.

Upon entering the classrooms and unpacking materials, both transitional kindergarten and kindergarten students gathered for daily calendar time. it was then that they sang songs, chanted, and reviewed information such as the days of the week, months of the year, daily weather, and seasonal themes. In one classroom observation of Kindergarten 1, Ms. Rosa's class participated in calendar time with gusto. She had a strong and steady pace throughout the activity and used phrases such as, "Hand high in the sky, off your head," "Close your eyes and make a wrinkle in your brain," and "Look, follow my finger. Eyes up here." Ms. Rosa mixed in some lecturing about differences between days in the week, months of the year, the seasons, and how to dress appropriately for the weather with singing and hand gestures, and called on students individually for answers to questions. Overall, there was a lot of chanting, and choral response. Songs and chants followed a strong beat. Some students moved their arms and feet to match the marching rhythm. Though there were also times when she called on individual students for answers, calendar time in Kindergarten 1, Ms. Rosa's classroom, was teacher-directed. Students clearly

enjoyed reviewing material with their teacher. They had the answers to her questions memorized. It was clear that they follow this exact routine each day.

Following calendar time, the classes moved into math. The lesson plans from both the transitional kindergarten and kindergarten classes feature a unique methodology that follows the pattern: "I [do], We [do], Two [do], and You [do]." Ms. Rosa, Kindergarten 1 teacher, explained that this was based on the recent adoption of Common Core Standards as the basis for their curriculum. It encouraged student collaboration and interaction during the lesson. Ms. Rosa explained:

> They just want to touch on these different areas of learning, so it's basically –first, they do it with me. Then we do it together. Then they do it in pairs. Then they do it by themselves. And the whole point is like, they touch on it [the objective] four times in four different ways. (Ms. Rosa, S.P.)

Classroom observations revealed that much of the independent practice—or what Ms. Rosa referred to as the "you do" parts of the lesson—was paper and pencil tasks in textbooks. Even in October, which was relatively early in the school year, students did not have any trouble finding the correct pages in their books. They seemed confident in finding their pages and helped others around them who needed a helping hand. This suggested that students used their math books frequently.

Objectives and Student Learning Expectations: Students Chant— "What I Will Learn Today!"

In Kindergarten 1, Ms. Rosa's class, and Kindergarten 2, Ms. Melissa's class, lessons began with stating the objective. Students chanted with the teacher, "Objective, objective, what's

the objective? What I am going to learn." Then the teachers asked students to identify which Student Learning Expectation (SLE) were most closely connected to the objective.

These Student Learning Expectations comprised the five expectations that outlined what each St. Catherine graduate would be able to accomplish or do. According to the 2016–2017 parent handbook, "Graduates of St. Catherine are capable of being: (a) active faith-filled Catholics, (b) life-long learners, (c) effective communicators, (d) responsible citizens, and (e) global ambassadors" (p. 5). Each of these was further outlined with specific behaviors so parents, teachers, and students knew and understood how the expectations would be reached. Lesson plans revealed that each lesson was connected to one of the Student Learning Expectations. Classroom observations also demonstrated that teachers explained or asked students to describe how each lesson objective contributed to meeting one of these expectations. In a number of classroom observations, students were able to articulate how the lesson objective was related to the Student Learning Expectation. For example, in Kindergarten 1, Ms. Rosa's math lesson began once Ms. Rosa noticed all students were ready to begin with their books opened to the correct page. She asked the class what an objective was. The class responded with a chant "An Objective is what I am going to learn." This was another chant with hand gestures. Then Ms. Rosa shared the math lesson objective: To read, write, and count 6, 7, and 8. Ms. Rosa explained the directions for each of the three math pages. Students had to count, write the numbers in sequence, and trace the numbers 6, 7, and 8 quietly at their table groups. Ms. Rosa circulated around the room while students were working. Often throughout the lesson she would "shush" the class if it got too noisy. She used a soft voice when talking to individual students to encourage students to do the same. Students who were finished had to sit with their hands folded.

Then Ms. Rosa would call them up to her chair at the front of the room, where they lined up, had their books checked, and then, if all was correct, they would place the book in their backpacks for homework that evening. Throughout this time, Ms. Rosa would redirect students who were getting distracted, needed extra attention, and managed the classroom work environment. She was very specific in her directions; students *had* to color tomatoes red, they *had* to number pictures in a certain order, and they *had* to wait to be called once their hands were folded. Through this lesson, Ms. Rosa taught her students that following directions was very important. Her words of encouragement were: "Good job. There you go. That's way better." She would also entice students to stay on task by saying, "[Student 1] has their book out, [Student 2] has their book out." This type of praise motivated students by making them feel like they had to aspire to be like others in their group. Conformity was important.

In each lesson that required independent practice in their textbooks, students color-coded the top of pages in their math or phonics workbooks to match the Student Learning Expectation the lesson helped them practice. Kindergarten 2 teacher, Ms. Melissa, described this process in her interview:

> Yeah, like I'll just give them [the sentence starter]: "Okay…math, what's the Student Learning Expectation there?" [Student response], "Orange," and [I say,] "What does orange mean?" and then they'll say it. I'm like, "Okay. [A life-long learner] who…" and then they finish it [the sentence] off for me. (Ms. Melissa, S.P.)

In Kindergarten 1 teacher, Ms. Rosa's, phonics lesson I observed the process Ms. Melissa described above. Ms. Rosa asked the class, "What are we going to work on for p. 73? Which Student Learning Expectation would this lesson qualify for?" One student volunteered that the

Student Learning Expectation would be "Lifelong Learners." Miss Rosa followed this response by asking, "What do we learn in Phonics?" The class answered in unison, "letters and sounds." She then dismissed students by their table groups to take out their books for the guided practice at their seats.

In Kindergarten 2, Ms. Melissa's math lesson was already in progress at 9:22. Her lesson objective was posted on the board for students to see. They were counting and writing the numbers 9 and 10. "Class," she said, "How do we spell ten?" There was a choral response "T-E-N." She continued: "Let's write our Student Learning Expectation at the top of the page." She set the lesson's pace: "Now we are going to draw apples. How many do you think?" Another choral response followed. At 9:40, Miss Melissa called to a student, "Pick up your head. Sitting up straight." At 9:50, students started to get wiggly in their seats. Some danced while sitting down. They began to fidget more, but the lesson continued. Finally, at 9:55, Miss Melissa noticed and said, "All right boys and girls, go ahead and close your books when you are done. Clean up: pencils away, crayons away, and books away." Despite sitting for 30 minutes at their tables, the class was quiet as they worked at their tables. All the while Ms. Melissa walked around their table groups.

Classroom observations indicated students follow this same pattern for their lessons in language arts, science, social studies, and religion. They took a morning recess for snack and outdoor play for 10 minutes from 9:50-10:00 a.m. kindergarten and transitional kindergarten students returned to the classrooms for language arts, then had lunch from 11–11:35 a.m. In the afternoons, lessons covered religion, science, and social studies, beginning around 1 or 1:30 p.m. This allowed students to take a second afternoon snack, combined with a second outdoor recess.

Kindergarten students had a daily nap from 11:45-12:30 p.m. Transitional kindergarten students napped for an hour and a half each day. In transitional kindergarten, after naptime, science and social studies occurred on Tuesdays and Thursdays, while on Mondays and Wednesdays students had dramatic play. In transitional kindergarten, students had daily "Free Time" in the afternoons for indoor choice play. In kindergarten, students could earn "Free Time" from 2:15- 2:45 p.m. about two or three times a week. While this did provide kindergarten students with the chance to have some unstructured, in-door play, it was not guaranteed. The class as a whole had to finish all the day's lessons. Additionally, any students who were on "red" of the Stoplight Classroom management system lost their free play time.

This daily schedule demonstrated how a kindergarten student at St. Catherine's worked hard each day in their lessons. Kindergarten students, in comparison to transitional kindergarten students, spent much more time on academic subjects and classwork. Both the transitional kindergarten and kindergarten teachers were aware of this difference. "It's always made clear to them [parents] that it starts out a little bit familiar to Transitional Kindergarten stuff, and then we start pushing it…we have a lot more things that TK [Transitional Kindergarten] doesn't have." Transitional kindergarten teacher Ms. Nicki admitted she also told parents that the homework students received was "nothing compared to what they really get in Kinder[garten]" (Ms. Nicki, S.P.).

Parent Scarlett, who experienced transitional kindergarten, and now kindergarten, at St. Catherine's, explained the difference between the two this way:

> They [in Kindergarten] do a lot more work. TK [Transitional Kindergarten] was more play, and here [in Kindergarten], it's more focused on work. They're trying to prepare

> them for first grade. And in TK [Transitional Kindergarten] they would tell us, 'When they go to Kindergarten, they're going to work'…In TK [Transitional Kindergarten] they would only have to write their first name. Here, they need to write their first and last name. It [Kindergarten] was geared on the expectations, "There is going to be work. It's not just going to be play." And I like that. I mean, you got to build the foundation young, so I do like that. (Parent Scarlett, S.P.)

"Stop playing. We're learning"

Contributing to the strong narrative of academic excellence, parents, teachers, and administrators shared the perception that students were at school to learn, not play. As Parent Scarlett, as said above, "'There is going to be work. It's not just going to be play.' And I like that" (Parent Scarlett, S.P.). Transitional Kindergarten 1 teacher, Ms. Nicki, made a similar comment. In her interview, she said, "They're learning…instead of playing all day" (Ms. Nicki, S.P.). The preference was for students in the kindergarten program to be learning or working rather than playing all day.

When probed to describe their understanding of play, parents had similar descriptions. Generally. all believed play had positive benefits for children of kindergarten age. Parent Jenny said:

> Play? Let's see. He plays. It would be free play, so he'd play with whatever is accessible to him whether it's with a ball or an action figure, reading a book, watching a movie. It can be anything like that. (Parent Jenny, S.P.)

This description captured what most of the parents attributed to "play," the use of creativity or imagination combined with materials or objects to supplement. Parent Lupe said:

> To me, play is not an organized sport. It's just free; use your imagination, run around, play, jump, all those things. Yes, yeah, they can play blocks and cars…just using your imagination and your hands, I think that's important. I mean, I think you can play by yourself, I think, you know, having all the children play together, they get to socialize and to learn to share, wait your turn, and all those things. (Parent Lupe, S.P.)

Parent Nina's description of play captured a similar sentiment of freedom:

> I think anything that children enjoy, anything that allows children to express freely thoughts, feelings, or emotions, anything like that. [My son] likes a lot physical [play] now, but he loves to sing, he loves Play-Doh, he loves to dress up and act out different characters. In general it seems like he really enjoys running around. (Parent Nina, S.P.)

Likewise, for children this age, Parent Scarlett described "running around," as a distinguishing feature of play:

> I think it's a lot of running around and chasing each other, and "I am this character," and "I am that character," or, "I'm the mom," and a lot of role-playing and stuff like that. A lot of hurt feelings, definitely a lot of hurt feelings, just really active. I really feel at this age they use their imagination. Whatever they deal with on a daily basis, they do tend to have that come out in what they're doing. (Parent Scarlett, S.P.)

Each of these descriptions of play captured the freedom of expression, creativity, and imagination play affords children.

When parents were asked specifically what they thought were some benefits of play, they cited such things as releasing energy, helping children maintain their focus, regulating moods or emotions, providing an opportunity for socialization, learning boundaries, and overall, serving as

a healthy outlet for the brain. Parent Jenny said some of the benefits for her son included, "[Expending] his energy, [using] his imagination, [developing] his vocabulary is a big one" (Parent Jenny, S.P.). Parent Nina said, "I think for kids, like, they really just act out and can play out their feelings and kind of just, in a way, rid themselves of any negative emotions" (Parent Nina, S.P.). Parent Lupe said that when her son played,

> He's less wound up and he's more relaxed, he sleeps better as well, and eats better too. [He's] generally happier and more at peace. When there are days that we haven't been able to get out, or go to the park or whatever; he's more tense. (Parent Lupe, S.P.)

Parent Scarlett said,

> They [Kindergarten students] get to work their brain, and they get to like act out different beings or even feelings...I mean I've heard her play and say stuff… and I'm just like, "Oh, okay." But for the most part, I think it's just—it's healthy for their brain. (Parent Scarlett, S.P.)

Parent Scarlett also mentioned the benefit of giving students and teachers a break when indoor classroom play was allowed:

> I think that they [Kindergarten students] get irritable, and they get bored. And I think it [play] breaks that for them, because they can't just sit there. So I definitely think it [play] helps to keep school fun, and it helps them to be able to focus. Also, they're not driving the teacher crazy, because they have all that pent-up energy. (Parent Scarlett, S.P.)

These responses were based on personal experiences with their own children. For these reasons, all parents agreed that children should be allowed to play during the school day, in addition to

outdoor recess and lunch. Without adding play into the day, parents warned that it would be difficult for teachers to accomplish everything they were called to do.

Ms. Rosa, Kindergarten 1 teacher, shared this sentiment. She recognized the need for her students to have time for play in the classroom. For her, play was about having an outlet and balance. She said:

> I mean, they're so structured during the day. It's very structured, [a] very strict routine, so at the end of the day, for them to just be able to interact at their leisure with who they want to interact with, do what they want to do, they get to choose what they want to play with and how they want to play. I'm in their face all day, that sometimes, at the end of the day…I think I should just let them have that time together without me telling them everything they need to do. (Ms. Rosa, S.P.)

Generally, parents and teachers agreed that it was important for students to be able to play during the school day. They expressed their opinions on why it could help students.

Thus far, this section has reviewed definitions of play and its benefits as described by parents and teachers. As this section continues, it highlights more of the underlying perceptions these adults held.

During one observation in Kindergarten 1, it was clear that playing with materials or exploring them in an alternative way was not allowed. At 1:05, students were in the middle of an art activity. The class was seated at their tables working on a mosaic flower project. Students were to use precut rectangles in yellow, red, blue, green, purple, and brown to form their flower on black construction paper. The teacher had provided a sample of the finished product on the board for students to refer to. Ms. Rosa, Kindergarten 1 teacher, was sitting at the front table

group, closest to the door. While students were working, Ms. Rosa was grading papers and homework. Ms. Rosa's teaching assistant was sitting at the back table assisting students at that table only. Ms. Rosa redirected a student who was working at the same table where she sat: "[Student 1] sit on your bottom and concentrate." Around 1:10, Ms. Rosa told another student at a different table: "[Student 2] stop talking about things that don't relate to what you are doing." While she continued with grading, Ms. Rosa noticed that the student closest to her, a little girl, was snipping the rectangle pieces into smaller triangles. Without looking up, she redirected this student without giving her too much attention and reminded the student to get back on task. When the student continued snipping without properly using larger pieces to complete the assignment, Ms. Rosa stopped grading, turned to the student, and said: "You are this close to losing your treasure [play time]. You were cutting just to cut." The student had not complied with Ms. Rosa's request to stop cutting and complete the assignment as she had been directed. The little girl pushed the assignment materials back toward the center of the table, turned her chair away from the table group and folded her arms across her chest while making an angry face at Ms. Rosa. She began crying out of frustration. Ms. Rosa said, "I'm not going to argue. You will not get your way." At 1:20, Ms. Rosa got up from her seat and walked away to help the other table groups. She provided encouragement and redirection as she interacted with students at their seats. Ms. Rosa helped one student who was holding scissors with an inefficient grip. After a couple of minutes, she sat down at a new table group. While all this happened, the other students in the class sat silently and continued on with their work. None of them came up to comfort the girl. By 1:25, the reluctant student has composed herself and was working on her

assignment just fine. She was on task and back to completing the assignment as her teacher had asked.

When I asked Kindergarten 1 teacher, Ms. Rosa, how she incorporated play in the classroom, she said she did not necessarily use play, rather she believed in the importance of movement and music for her students. She said:

> I wouldn't always categorize it as play. I do a lot of movement. So at least they're getting up and they're doing something. I try to work in different movement the best I can and song. I'm big with songs. So I would say if not maybe so much play, for sure music and movement. (Ms. Rosa, S.P.)

Ms. Rosa's comments emphasized a distinction between her methods and play. She clearly expressed the importance of music and movement for engaging her students. Classroom observations revealed her frequent use of chants, hand gestures, and call-response participation. However, her response also suggested she was reluctant to label her teaching practices as "play." Ms. Rosa also used of play as an incentive for her students. In essence, it was a reward for completing their lessons.

Kindergarten 2 teacher, Ms. Melissa, also said she did not necessarily use play in her teaching methods. Rather, she responded that she incorporated visuals and occasionally role-playing to act out stories from the Bible. From her perspective, Ms. Melissa thought the biggest critique of using play in the classroom was the amount of time it took away from teaching.

For both kindergarten teachers, the in-class "free play" time did not appear in their lesson plans.

Academics over Play

Parent participants generally stated that they thought children did not have sufficient time to play both in and out of school hours. Given homework expectations, the increased presence of technology, and an ever-growing pressure to maximize time for learning, they stated that it was a challenge to allow students a chance to play during the school day.

Parent Nina expressed that she was impressed with all her son was able to do academically, by the fall of his kindergarten year, but of course, there were trade-offs. She captured this as she said:

> [Children] don't seem to have as much fun. Like… they're more serious and I don't know, you know…you're only a kid for so long. Sometimes…I think [it's] a nice thing to just be free of expectations for a little bit. Now, though he's only five, on Wednesdays he has karate, so we go out [to eat] and I'd say, "Do you want something to eat?" and he's like, "What about my homework? Am I going to have time to finish my homework?" There's a part of me that's like, "Oh, he's too grown up already." He keeps himself in check and I think that again, it's part of this structure, but at the same time, it's like, okay, I don't think they're kids as long as…before." (Parent Nina, S.P.)

Parent Nina's words captured the tension between being a child and having time to play or "be free" with the school's focus on academic excellence. Despite this, she kept saying it was beneficial to have her son enrolled in a program with rigorous academic expectations. In fact, Parent Scarlett said something similar:

> I think we've come a long way as far as—could we teach them a lot more. We have higher expectations for our children. I think that's a good thing. I do think it's

> [Kindergarten] a lot more focused on education [as] opposed to playing and…being like a babysitter. We've learned that kids benefit from actually having that foundation now [as] opposed to before…when it was more play and all that…which is great, but I think then they had a harder transition into first grade. (Parent Scarlett, S.P.)

Parent Scarlett's words conveyed the same sentiments as other St. Catherine parents; it was better for students to be academically prepared early in kindergarten and have high academic expectations. Though this might mean less play time, it would allow students to have an easier time in first grade and beyond.

Kindergarten 1 teacher, Ms. Rosa, recognized the tension between academic excellence and play. She said:

> Well, I think the Math is important. I know that, you know, where as a nation we are lagging in Math, but I think that the playing and the socializing are very important as well, so…it's hard to find a good balance. (Ms. Rosa, S.P.)

Ms. Rosa and the other teachers in the kindergarten program at St. Catherine created and supported a curriculum that addressed academics because approach was highly valued by the school community. Academic excellence was a shared priority and mutual goal between parents, teachers, and administrators at St. Catherine School. Finding the right approach to accomplish these academic expectations was a challenge parents recognized. Parent Scarlett said: "It's a challenge and I think our teachers are amazing…because it's hard. It's definitely hard" (Parent Scarlett, S.P.).

Conclusion

This chapter presented emergent themes and supporting evidence from the case study conducted at St. Catherine School. It provided a description of the school site, introduced study participants, and developed a picture of the social, cultural, and ideological context of the school. The chapter explored four themes and subsequent domains that emerged from the data. These themes included (a) Tradition, Structure, and "Old School" Policies: The Ideological Base of St. Catherine School; (b) Intimacy and Communication: School Partnerships as the Foundation of St. Catherine- A Community School; (c) Kindergarten as an Initiation into the St. Catherine School community; and (d) Being a child at St. Catherine School—Work Hard, Pray Hard, Hardly Play. It ended by discussing the emphasis on academic excellence over play opportunities within the classroom.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to understand how parents, teachers, and administrators view play within the kindergarten curriculum. A single Catholic school in the Los Angeles Archdiocese provided the context for the research. Using a case study methodology, it examined the following research questions:

1. What are parent, teacher, and administrator perceptions of play in a Catholic kindergarten classroom?
2. How is play implemented within the classroom?
    a. To what extent is it child-directed?
3. What is the relationship between teacher, administrator, and parent perceptions of play and how it is implemented in the classroom?

In order to investigate these research questions, classroom observations, personal interviews, and school documents were utilized to gather data. The following chapter reviews findings that emerged from the study as they relate to the research questions, discusses their implications, and provides recommendations for groups affected or impacted by the study. It is organized into four parts: (a) summary of findings, (b) discussion, (c) recommendations, and (d) conclusion.

Summary of Findings

This section summarizes key findings by research question and how these findings relate to the literature as reviewed in Chapter 2.

Research Question 1: What Are Parent, Teacher, and Administrator Perceptions of Play In a Catholic Kindergarten Classroom?

One perception adult participants held was that play is disconnected from learning. Through interviews, the closest parents got to equating play with learning was in describing how play serves as a great outlet for kindergarten students to refocus their attention. In fact, parents and teachers both viewed play as a reward. Taking an almost behaviorist perspective, free play was used for classroom management purposes and served as a treat for students who complied with behavior and academic expectations. As lessons were explored through didactic pedagogies, the literature on developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood education provides more background for these perceptions.

Ginsburg et al., (2007) published a clinical report in *the American Academy of Pediatrics Journal* that used empirical evidence to demonstrate how play helps children develop physically, cognitively, and emotionally. The report provided evidence on how play contributed to healthy brain development and also allowed children to process their fears, anxieties, and stress (Ginsburg et al., 2007). The report also described the potential of unstructured free play to support children as they developed new skills, increase their confidence, and boost their resiliency to future challenges. Ginsburg et al. (2007) also drew connections between play with a child's school readiness skills since play promoted self-regulation, cooperation with others, and developed focus on task-specific activities. Using play as a reward, instead of as an integral and important part of the school day, eliminated one opportunity for students at St. Catherine school to develop the socioemotional and physical skills that could complement and enhance their academic growth.

Likewise, Stipek et al. (1995) found that children who were in classrooms that used developmentally appropriate practice, such as play, rated their own abilities higher than students who are in academically focused classrooms. As the research demonstrates, children who have an opportunity to engage in child-directed free play develop confidence since they are able to practice problem solving, decision-making, and negotiation through their play activities (Stipek et al., 1995). Comparing the findings back to this research, when free play in kindergarten is limited, students have fewer opportunities to develop the intangible skills that contribute to their overall socioemotional development.

According to Bodrova and Leong (2007), research shows a strong connection between play and the development of learning activities. For example, Bodrova and Leong suggested that when children play games with rules they are actually being prepared for a specific kind of learning activity: the use of didactic games. This notion also aligns closely with Piaget (1962) in his constructivist theory of cognitive development. When children play games with rules, they are developing their symbolic reasoning. Play with rules requires a higher level of cognitive development as children must fit information into existing "schema" or accommodate their experience to create new "schema" (Piaget, 1962). Didactic games, therefore, allow students to engage in interactions that are playful, provide opportunities to test schema, as well as learn the academic content of the game. The findings from the study suggest that this link, between learning and play, is not strongly established. At the school site, the prevailing assumption most parents held was that play and learning did not go together, though this idea is contradicted by the literature.

Returning to Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development, he wrote, "play is a source of development and creates the zone of proximate development" (1978, p. 74). In this way, when children play, they naturally create a moment by which they are cognitively developing. Thus, according to Vygotsky, when the kindergarten students were deprived of opportunities to play in the classroom, especially during learning activities, they were deprived of the chance to engage their Zone of Proximal Development. They were limited in their ability to engage with and understand the world.

Another perception teachers in this study expressed was that parents and administrators would question their professionalism if they entered the teacher's classroom during free play. In their interviews, both kindergarten classroom teachers, Ms. Rosa and Ms. Melissa, said a parent or administrator would describe free play as "chaos." Miller and Almon (2009) similarly found other teachers voice this same reluctance to allow kindergarten students more time for free play due to a general belief that administration would look upon this activity as a waste of valuable instructional time. Confirming this stance, according to Graue (2010), some administrators go so far as to say that play time *is* "waste[d] instructional time" (p. 29).

Parents and teachers at St. Catherine School had the perception that play was beneficial for students. Some of these benefits included: releasing energy, helping children maintain their focus, regulating moods and emotions, providing an opportunity for socializing, giving children a chance to learn appropriate boundaries, and in general, support healthy brain development. Parents in particular cited these benefits based on personal observations of their own children. Teachers specifically described play as a chance for children to direct their own activity and socialize with their peers. This is in contrast to a majority of the children's day; spent in a highly

structured environment and routine as focused on academic lessons. Kindergarten 1 teacher, Ms. Rosa, believed that play time allowed students a chance to take a break from instruction for a little bit and follow their own interests, develop their friendships, and enjoy some down time. In her opinion, the child-directed play provided balance from the regular occurring school day dynamic where she led lessons, guided activities, and generally, was in charge of what students did within the classroom. Kindergarten 2 teacher, Ms. Melissa, also described free play as giving students a break.

The literature from Ginsburg et al., (2007), National Association for the Education of Young Children (2009), and Miller and Almon (2009), and other experts in the field also present these benefits of play. Taken from the perspective of a developmentally appropriate practice, play contributed to child learning. The literature supports this perspective. Additionally, the works of early childhood theorists on play, as were described in the theoretical framework of this study, Froebel (1891), Montessori (1912), Dewey (1916), and Malaguzzi (1998), similarly expressed the benefit for children to learn through child-directed exploration and play. These theories also touch upon the right of the child to play and discover. Therefore, according to these theorists, the conditions for learning are those that allow for child-directed free play.

Parents, teachers, and administrators at St. Catherine School held the perception that academic success was more important than play. This came across as participants expressed their pride for the school's reputation of academic excellence, their emphasis on traditional "old school" policies, and, by and large, a preference for "structure" in classroom activities.

In a way, this shared vision also contributed to a one-size-fits-all approach to curriculum and pedagogy. Classroom observations revealed that instruction usually occurred in a whole-

group format. Students moved through their lessons based on the teacher's pacing, and there were few opportunities for student choice. The expectation was for most activities, even art projects, to be completed as closely to the teacher's model as possible. Noticeably absent was the idea that child-directed play could advance complex thought and contribute to student learning. Instead, teachers directed most activities in the classroom and learning was strictly prescribed.

This singular vision of academic success stands in contrast to Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences (1983). According Gardner's theory, there are seven different types of intelligence, and each person may be stronger or weaker in each of these seven areas. These "intelligences" include linguistic, spatial, musical, bodily kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. Gardner's theory allows for different yet equally powerful definitions of success because individuals can exhibit their strengths in the area they are most "intelligent." Likewise, play can provide children an opportunity to develop multiple facets of cognition and also multiple ways of understanding the world.

The findings from the study corroborate the literature that suggests there is a mentality among parents of a prekindergarten-to-college pipeline. In today's context, the sense of urgency initiated by No Child Left Behind to teach young children to read and do math computation has been compounded by a preoccupation with college admission. Though this priority is most linked to a narrow definition of success, it has real repercussions for young students and parents alike. In fact, for some groups, the college one attends carries a social currency valued more highly based on the selectivity of the school (Bruni, 2015; Chansky, 2012; Ginsburg, Jablow, & Jones, 2006; Thompson, 1990). In this value system, parents of preschool and kindergarten children are tasked with doing all they can to give their child an advantage that will lead to

college admission and "success." In fact, parents are seen as the responsible parties in shaping a young child's college trajectory (Bahr, 2014; Hickey, 2015). Thompson (1990) even went so far to describe the college students are admitted into as a social measure of their parent's success. With this mindset, parents send their children to kindergarten programs with a strong academic focus as a way to ensure the highest test scores, and hence college-track opportunities. As was seen at the school site, parents pushed aside their instinctive worry about the amount of homework and academic pressures their kindergarten children faced because they felt it would be worth it, in the end, for their child to have the academic advantage as promised by the school.

Research Question 2: How is Play Implemented within The Classroom? To What Extent is it Child-Directed?

The first part of this research question looked at when and how play occurred in the classroom. Reviewing the data showed four findings: (a) Play occurred at free time in kindergarten classrooms; (b) in the transitional kindergarten classroom, play occurred during dramatic play and free time; (c) During lessons, language play sometimes occurred; (d) Math centers allowed for play-based learning. The second part of the question focused on child-directed play and when students were allowed to direct their learning through discovery and exploration.

Play occurs at free time. The most visible example of unstructured, child-directed play in the classroom was observed at "free time," sometimes called "free play." During this time, students would take out blocks, cars, dinosaurs, and kitchen toys to play with. Occasionally, the teachers joined in the play when students invited them. During free play, students had the chance to select their materials and direct their own activities. In the Kindergarten 1 and Kindergarten 2

classrooms, free time could occur in the last 30 minutes of the day, approximately two or three times a week. Transitional kindergarten students had free time scheduled each day, plus an additional Dramatic Play session twice a week. This meant that twice a week, transitional kindergarten students had an opportunity for extra play at about 35 minutes each session.

When considering the six-hour school day and amount of time spent on instruction, having only a couple of 30-minute play sessions does not seem like enough for kindergarten students to experience the many benefits of play in the classroom. The literature confirms this "disappearance" of play in kindergarten and even in early childhood education settings (Aras, 2016; Chervenak, 2009; Lewis, 2017; Miller & Almon, 2009; Nicolopoulou, 2010; Ranz-Smith, 2007).

In transitional kindergarten there is dramatic play and free time. Findings from the study demonstrate the transitional kindergarten curriculum incorporates more time for play and generally, an increased amount of developmentally appropriate practices, as compared to the kindergarten classrooms at St. Catherine School. As part of their daily schedule, transitional kindergarten students get forty-five minutes of free play each day and an additional thirty-five minutes twice a week when there is "dramatic play" time. During dramatic play students in transitional kindergarten 1 dress up as astronauts, firefighters, and other community helpers. They create and imagine scenarios and play collaboratively with their peers. Props, costumes, and child-sized furniture supports this type of play and helps children use their imagination to carry out a scenario they are familiar with, such as playing house, pretending to be a family, or taking care of pets. Vygotskian theory supports the use of dramatic play in helping children "master the necessary prerequisites of academic skills through engagement in mature make-

believe play" (Bodrova, 2008). According to Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (1978), when children dress up and make-believe they are someone else, they are effectively tapping into their Zone of Proximal Development because they are working toward self-regulation and practicing the skills they need to imagine themselves in their new persona. This type of play also encourages higher-level cognitive abilities such as sustained attention, symbolizing, and problem solving (Bodrova, 2008).

Language play. In one observation, Ms. Rosa, used language play much to her student's delight. During her lesson on the letter G, she substituted the /g/ sound for the /f/ sound in the word *fan*. She asked her students, "Is it a picture of a /G/ /G/ gan?" The class roared with laughter. Although not child-directed, this language play qualifies as an implementation of play in the classroom. According to Miller and Almon (2009), there are twelve types of play and language play is one of them. Language play can include playing with words, rhymes, verses and songs and the telling or retelling of stories (Miller & Almon, 2009). Both Ms. Melissa and Ms. Rosa use songs and chants in their lessons. Theories of both Froebel (1891) and Gardner (1983) support the use of language play to help children advance their cognitive abilities. Froebel used song and rhyme to make learning fun for the students in his kindergarten classes (Wong & Logan, 2016). Gardner's characterization of linguistic intelligence includes skills related to speaking, writing, and listening (Gardner, 1983). Thus, the game Ms. Rosa played in the example above demonstrates how linguistic intelligence was developed.

Vygotsky (1978) also studied how language provides the opportunity for children to learn from their peers and superiors as they engage the zone of proximal development. Language play

as demonstrated by the teachers, supports students' cognitive growth and understanding of the world and its symbolic systems.

Math Centers and Play-Based Learning. Play is also implemented in the classroom through math centers and play-based learning. In both the transitional kindergarten and Kindergarten 1 and Kindergarten 2 classrooms, students used math manipulatives to practice their math skills. In transitional kindergarten, using the maniuplatives was more about using tactile objects to assist with counting, measuring, or exploring concepts. This use of manipulatives to accompany math instruction reflects Montessori's writings that suggest children should be able to work through lessons by using tools or self-correcting tactile representations (Montessori, 1912). Similarly, Froebel (1891) had students use "gifts" or concrete materials to encourage exploration of math concepts through ready-made materials. According to Bodrova and Leong (2007), using didactic games, as were evident at math centers time, is a great way to encourage students to meet academic benchmarks in a developmentally appropriate way. The literature supports using such games as a way to keep students engaged, especially in an era of rigorous academic benchmarks via the Common Core Standards (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2015).

Limited Child-Directed Play. The extent that child-directed play occurred in kindergarten at St. Catherine School was limited to the free playtime in the classroom. Otherwise, classroom observation data demonstrated lessons were teacher-led and directed. According to the theories of Piaget (1962), Froebel (1891), Montessori (1912), and Dewey (1916), there should be opportunities for children to learn through their own exploration and discovery. In fact, such child-directed exploration was central to Piaget's (1962) cognitive

development theory. Based on Piaget's theory, when children play, they are actually testing their "schema" or basic structure for understanding of the world. For example, as children play they might see a cause and effect relationship and either assimilate the new information into an existing schema, or accommodate the new information by creating new schema. Yet, without an opportunity to practice this self-directed exploration, the students have to rely on second hand experience through their teacher's lesson. Piaget's theory of play as it relates to learning is relevant to recall due to the importance he placed on play as a vehicle for development. Piaget wrote, "Every time we teach a child something, we keep him from inventing it himself" (1962, p.27). This relates to the heavy reliance on direct instruction from the teachers at St. Catherine school. Through their pedagogy, they are interfering with the child's process of actively constructing knowledge. Frankly, the students were not allowed to explore on their own, either the materials or concepts, in a way that was different from how the teacher planned.

Again, Froebel (1891) and Montessori (1912) both believed in the ability of children to explore their world at their own pace and using materials or toys that would facilitate such exploration. Dewey (1916) also believed in individual exploration as a way to develop critical thinking skills. Yet the opportunity for St. Catherine kindergarten students to use teacher provided materials to play and their own learning was missed.

According to Malaguzzi's concept of the child, child-directed learning signals a trust and respect for the child (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998). Using these two frameworks, with balance shifted so far on teacher-led activities, the opportunity for children to fully engage in their learning was cut short. Miller and Almon (2009) suggested that classroom activities teeter

throughout the school day on activities that are rich in child-initiated play with those that are teacher-guided, experiential activities.

Research Question 3: What is the Relationship Between Teacher, Administrator, and Parent Perceptions of Play and How is it Implemented in the Classroom?

Answering the third research question required comparing parent, teacher, and administrator perceptions of play with implementation of play in the kindergarten curriculum. In looking at these two pieces together, the findings from the study indicated a gap between understandings of play and goals for implementation.

Satisfied with the kindergarten curriculum. Parents and teachers indicated their knowledge of the benefits play has for students and often provided anecdotes to illustrate how play positively impacts kindergarten students. These benefits have already been shown to align with research by Ginsburg et al., (2007). Parents and teachers also expressed their belief that play should occur in the classroom in addition to outside at recess.

Parent participants said free play in the classroom could help students manage their energy and offered a chance for students to "be kids." Kindergarten 1 and Kindergarten 2 classroom teachers both expressed their wish for more time during the school day so they could provide students with more time to play. While parents and teaches expressed their support of classroom play, they did not wish to change or modify the kindergarten curriculum. Not a single participant said she would change the way play was implemented into the curriculum. Much like the study by Fisher et al. (2008), parents and teachers differ in their acceptance of play as a viable methodology for learning. Kindergarten teachers expressed some desire to increase the

time or frequency students have for in class play. However, this desire was pretty small and not seen as a priority.

As data showed, parents, teachers, and administrators at St. Catherine's prided themselves on the strong academic foundation their school provided, especially at the kindergarten level. This priority aligns with literature in the field that expresses the movement in early childhood education to push academics further down to kindergarten and early childhood education (Chervenak, 2011; Miller & Almon, 2009; Nicolopoulou, 2010; Patte, 2010; Schroeder, 2007, Vecchiotti, 2001). The perception shared by adults at St. Catherine's was that the kindergarten curriculum was great and did not need to be adjusted. As parents, teachers, and administrators saw it, the curriculum and the way it had been implemented helped students succeed; students were seen as respectful and responsible people, made friends easily, and accomplished important benchmarks, like learning to read and solving basic math. According to the literature, the significant amount of teacher-led, didactic, whole-group lessons, along with limited opportunities for the child-directed exploration or play, amounted to developmentally inappropriate practices for kindergarten (Burts et al., 1990, 1992; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Miller & Almon, 2009; Patte, 2010; Rescorla et al., 2001). For example, Burts et al. (1990) defined inappropriate practice as "rote learning; abstract paper-and-pencil activities; and direct teaching of discrete skills, often presented to large groups of children" (Burts et al., 1990, p. 408). Many of these practices were observed through classroom observations. Burts et al. added to these developmentally inappropriate practices to include use of workbooks, worksheets, and academic skill-based instruction, few opportunities to move around the room and make choices, an

overreliance on punishment and extrinsic reward systems, and use of standardized assessment tests. All of these methods were observed in the kindergarten classrooms during the study.

Tying this back to the theoretical framework, Froebel (1891), Montessori (1912), Dewey, (1916), and Malaguzzi (1998) prominently wrote about the importance of play in a child's life. According to these theorists, play is the means by which children learn about the world. It is within a child's nature to question, experience, and explore the environment as well as engage with peers, parents, and teachers. The findings in the classrooms at the study site weighed more heavily upon didactic teaching as opposed to trusting that the children would learn through their own explorations.

As a way of advancing more complex thought in the students, such didactic methods have been found to be less effective than play-based methods due to the level of engagement the child has with a didactic learning experience (Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978). Malaguzzi (1998) specifically wrote about the importance of the physical classroom environment as the third teacher. By engaging with the classroom, peers, and materials, the child has an opportunity for open-ended discovery, problem posing, and solving (Malaguzzi, 1998).

Play is undervalued. At St. Catherine's School, play was treated as a reward for kindergarten students. Teacher and parent attitudes suggested that play was best viewed as an outlet, energizer, or reward for participation, attention, and successfully completing the day's lessons. Another way this can be understood is through a simile: play is a dessert, an indulgence, and a small part of a healthy diet. This perspective limits the way play is utilized. It makes "play" a tainted word that runs counter to the school narrative of academic excellence. Play will only be fully utilized as a vehicle seen as capable of advancing complex thought in students while

simultaneously promoting their social-emotional development when perceptions shift and parents can understand that play helps students develop nonacademic skills, like taking turns, respecting property, and demonstrating responsibility. These skills are important, not only in the short term, but also because they teach students how to be courteous individuals. When parents, teachers, and administrators dismiss play as a purely leisure activity, it loses its richness and potential impact on all students.

Lewis (2017) described this devaluation of play as an "erosion of play." He described play as something that only exists in small space and places within the classroom. Commercialization of play has completely taken over what play is really about: imagination, creativity, and open-ended possibilities as constructed by the child.

Currently, Common Core Standards have been adopted across the nation, though now many states are reconsidering the standards or redacting their implementation (Politico, 2014). Much like the pressures students, teachers, and administrators felt after No Child Left Behind, the pressure to meet Common Core's curricular benchmarks and measure student growth via new adaptive tests has perpetuated the pressure for an academic focus in kindergarten (Rentner & Kober, 2014). This mindset contributes to the proliferation of academic kindergarten programs like the one this study presented at St. Catherine's.

Kindergarten has changed. Parents and teachers at St. Catherine's expressed their observations that kindergarten today has less play and more academics than when they were children and even in comparison to their older children a few years ago. This reality may stem from policy changes and reforms coinciding with No Child Left Behind, and, currently, an effort to promote the Common Core Standards. In fact, many experts in Early Childhood Education

have written about this shift away from play and straight into academic preparation in kindergarten and early childhood.

In "What Happened to Kindergarten?" Curwood (2007) asked the question: "Are academic pressures stealing childhood?" (p. 28). Curwood presented the idea of academic kindergartens robbing children of important social and experiential learning environments while drowning them with skill-and-drill exercises. The academic environment at St. Catherine aligns closely to Curwood's characterization of an academic kindergarten. Yet, data from the study suggest this is the type of rigorous academic environment and preparation that parents, teachers, and administrators prefer.

Miller and Almon's (2009) "The Crisis in Kindergarten," put a spotlight on how kindergarten has changed in the last 20 years. The robust report follows the transformation of kindergarten, looks at how the climate of accountability and assessment impacts kindergarten children, and discusses repercussions on children who are currently in early childhood education settings. Similarly, Nicolopoulou (2010) presented evidence on the alarming disappearance of play from Early Childhood education, as did Lewis (2017). Data from the current study confirms what these reports and articles suggest: play, as in unstructured and child-directed, is disappearing from kindergarten. The challenge this study poses is whether this trend will be allowed to continue or whether advocates, including parents, teachers, and administrators can reverse the trend.

Discussion

This study has implications in a number of areas and for groups impacted by the findings. The following section puts into discussion both the findings of the study and the implications

these have on various groups, including schools, Catholic education, the field of Early Childhood Education, the future of children in the United States, leaders for social justice, teacher preparation programs—especially those focused on Early Childhood Education, and future research.

To use a social justice perspective, this study was important because children, especially those in kindergarten, are at the mercy of their caretakers' decisions. It is important for these adults to understand that play is essential to healthy child growth and development (Ginsburg et al., 2007). In fact, play is a human right (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989) and the reality that it is disappearing from many early childhood programs is disturbing.

Schools

The findings from the current study have important implications for schools and their kindergarten and transitional kindergarten programs. First, the research questions that explored parent, teacher, and administrator perceptions of play helped uncover the values, beliefs, and practices that influence kindergarten and transitional kindergarten curriculum at St. Catherine School.

Other schools would also benefit from exploring the values and beliefs at the core of their curriculum in order to understand their policies and practices. For example, with some conversations about how play is used among kindergarten teachers at St. Catherine School, teachers might be able to discuss why they use play as a reward. With this knowledge, schools can decide whether the policies and practices currently being used are appropriate as they relate to programs, the curriculum, and student welfare.

Students. This study highlighted that students need to be included in decisions regarding their learning, much as is practiced in Reggio Emilia approach and pedagogy (Edwards et al., 1998). Based on findings from the study, kindergarten students do not have much opportunity to freely explore or discover through unstructured, child-directed play in the classroom, though these methods have been shown to have benefits for students (Piaget, 1962; Montessori, 1912; Wan, 2014). The study demonstrated that kindergarten students are passive participants in their learning, which contradicts Piaget's theory of play and its relationship to learning. Through Piaget's theory, children construct their knowledge of the world by creating "schema" or scripts about their world. Then, based on interactions with the world, they test out their "schema" and use the information to either "assimilate" the experience into the existing "schema," or "accommodate" new schema to match their experience (Piaget, 1962). Unfortunately, when students are not allowed to explore their materials, ideas, or learning, they are not given the opportunity to grow as Piaget described.

Parents. The study highlighted that parents do have a meaningful impact on their child's educational experience (Epstein, 2011). It should also encourage parents who want to work in partnership with their child's classroom teacher. Since parents at St. Catherine School believed so much in the school's vision of success and its educational philosophy, the students experienced a consistent message with regard to cultivating school values at home as well as in their classrooms. This is consistent with Epstein's (2011) Framework of Parental Involvement.

Another implication for parents is the need to listen to their intuitive feelings regarding their child's school experience. At St. Catherine, a few of the parent participants expressed their concern with the amount of homework their kindergartener or transitional kindergarten student

had to complete. Though parents had some reservations and felt perhaps that it was not so healthy for their five-year-old child to be stressed about completing homework on time at such a young age, parents convinced themselves that it was in their child's best interest. In many ways, this narrative was one that came from the school itself. Parents were explicitly told at Back to School Night that the expectation was for them to help students complete their homework on a daily basis. The study findings provided evidence that parents were trying to convince themselves that this developmentally inappropriate practice was best for their child even though there was something about the experience that was unsettling.

Teachers. Teachers from the study were in the challenging position in the sense that they wanted to give their students the best educational experience possible and prepare them for the rigors and demands of the next grade while also applying developmentally appropriate practices, such as play in the classroom. The literature demonstrates that many teachers are in a similar challenging position: curricular demands, parent expectations, and administrator pedagogical preferences are often pulling teachers in divergent directions (Chervenak, 2011; Nicolopoulou, 2010; Patte, 2010). The implications for teachers from this study is that teachers have a responsibility to adopt practices that are in the best interest of their students and respect the developmental level of their students. While it may be tempting to coach students to achieve rigorous academic goals, this must not come at the cost of ignoring their developmental level. Teachers are their students' advocates. They often possess the most knowledge of child development and experience when compared to parents. Teachers have the most direct impact on their students as they frequently spend more time with the student each day than the child's own

parents do. It is up to teachers to protect the child. Using developmentally inappropriate practices is irresponsible.

Another point that begs discussion is the amount of training teachers had in early childhood theory and practices. Results from the study showed that only one teacher had any background in child development. Since the teachers declined to state whether they had a teaching credential and what field their degree was in, it was challenging to ascertain whether teachers had sufficient background in early childhood theory.

Administrators. Findings from the study should call upon administrators to consider their community and the values or systems the school replicates through education. The administrator must remain in conversation with parents, make classroom observations, and critically consider the methodologies used at school. While teachers often know their students best, administrators need to know their staff. The administrator needs to work with the school community: parents, teachers, students, and staff to dialogue and discuss a vision for the school.

Administrators also need to hire qualified teachers for their faculty positions. For example, kindergarten and transitional kindergarten teachers should have some background and training in early childhood. Using classroom management techniques that work for older students are developmentally inappropriate for kindergarteners.

In the study, one teacher said that their kindergarten program was well established because the principal did not want to change it. The administration should be in charge of encouraging the school faculty and staff to continue to develop professionally and support teachers as they develop curriculum (Finnan, 2014).

Administrators are also called to guide teachers and parents in adopting practices that are best for students. Likewise, the school administrative team should keep parents and teachers informed on best practices and trends in education. In this way, the study suggests that administrators embrace their role as experts in the curriculum and fulfill their responsibility to clearly communicate with faculty and parents which standards and methodologies are important to the school curriculum. Administrators should also consider the structures or practices they support at their schools to incorporate the voices of parents, teachers, and students with regard to the curriculum. For example, the administrator should reflect on this question: Do avenues, forums, or protocols exist at my school that ensure each affected party can contribute to conversations about the curriculum?

Catholic Education and the Los Angeles Archdiocese

The current study suggests that when compared to the literature (Burts et al., 1990, 1998; Charlesworth et al., 1993) developmentally inappropriate practices were used in kindergarten at St. Catherine's school. This finding contrasted with what Frabutt and Waldron (2013) described as what most parents' want in a Catholic early childhood education program. According to the researchers, parents expect a developmentally appropriate program with a faith formation (Frabutt & Waldron, 2013). Findings from this study do not align with Frabutt and Waldron. According to participants, parents expressed their preference for faith formation, especially to the extent that it is integrated into the curriculum, but did not seem as concerned about developmentally appropriate practices. Since parents expressed their trust and confidence in the school professionals, they did not raise many questions about instructional practices or pedagogies during the course of the study.

The study also suggested that play and child-directed exploration or engagement within the classroom was not fully supported. Since Catholic education is dedicated to "a long-standing commitment to academic excellence rooted in a faith-based mission" (National Catholic Education Association, 2013), it is up to Catholic leaders to evaluate practices and pedagogy to ensure it is in alignment with this philosophy or whether these practices run contrary to the Church's mission to protect children. An important implication from this study is for Catholic schools individually, and the Archdiocese to ask themselves: how can Catholic education be reimagined so that it stays true to the mission of nurturing children and families? Catholic education should not pursue academic excellence at the expense of developmentally appropriate practices in kindergarten, or any grade level. Catholic education needs stay true to the message Jesus proclaimed when he said, "Let the children come to me!" (Matthew19:14, The New American Bible). He did not say children needed to come single-file, without making noise, or somberly, only to be seen and not heard. Catholic schools need to follow this example and provide environments where children are able to learn and grow as they naturally do: through play, conversation, exploration, and by investigating their own ideas and theories in a safe, nurturing environment.

Since most Catholic schools are kindergarten through eighth grade, their kindergarten programs are often evaluated or governed much as the junior high classrooms are, a model that is unfair to the early childhood education kindergartens need to provide. For example, the National Association for the Education of Young Children's rigorous accreditation process ensures that preschools and other early childhood education programs and facilities offer high-quality environments for young children. However, in Catholic school settings, the kindergarten

program is not evaluated as a stand-alone early childhood program. It is taken in sum with the rest of the school. Evaluation standards that are appropriate for elementary school or middle school programs are much different than what is required for a developmentally appropriate kindergarten. A different evaluation system that protects the developmental levels of kindergarten students is necessary to ensure Catholic schools are protecting their youngest students.

As the study demonstrated, parents, teachers, and administrators at the study site prided themselves on the "old school" policies and traditions the school practiced. Outsiders may also be quick to equate Catholic education with similar policies or practices. Yet the behaviors and expectations associated with these practices come at the expense of being developmentally appropriate for kindergarten-age children. The task for Catholic educators is to challenge this stereotype. Catholic education needs to be reimagined so that it seen as academically excellent, but also forward thinking, compassionate, and still reflective of church teachings.

Field of Early Childhood during Common Core Standards

Childhood is being rushed as play is taken out of kindergarten (Curwood, 2007). This means that Early Childhood Educators and experts in the field need to advocate for play and other developmentally appropriate practices. Already, with the increase in academic expectations placed on children in early childhood settings, studies like this one are even more important in demonstrating how widespread it is for academics to be favored over play. Early Childhood education practitioners need to be more vocal in promoting practices like "guided play," (Weisberg et al., 2016) as a way to draw upon Vygotskian theories for cognitive and social development.

Under the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), new provisions have been made: "to promote early learning coordination within communities, greater alignment with the early elementary grades; and early childhood education focused capacity building among teachers, leaders, and other staff serving young children" (First Five Years Fund, 2016). For the intersection between Common Core and Early Childhood, the Early Learning Provisions, as provided for under the Every Student Succeeds Act seems to be promising. This is an opportunity for early childhood staff to discuss policy changes with other colleagues and continue learning and collaboration.

It was surprising that the Common Core Standards did not have as large of an impact on the kindergarten curriculum and pedagogy than the literature suggested. For example, teacher participants in the study seemed to have made minor adjustments in their lesson delivery, though they admitted that the Common Core influence was really another way of naming pedagogy "they already did." Only one parent participant mentioned Common Core, and this was mostly because she was a teacher and head concerns about Common Core from the parents at her school. Overall, parent perceptions of the curriculum had been influenced by the prolonged exposure and attention to the Common Core. The surprising fact for both parents and teachers was that neither group mentioned that the Common Core encourages play or saw how the two could go together.

Future of Children in the United States

For children in the United States, the current educational era of accountability and standardization has meant play is pushed further and further to the fringes of importance, and there is relatively little time to enjoy childhood. Children in this current context experience high

levels of anxiety and stress, which adversely affects their brain development (Lupien et al., 2009). High-stakes testing and academic pushes in the curriculum mean children are spending an increased amount of time "learning," but less time learning through their own child-directed experiences in the world. Malaguzzi's poem "The Hundred Languages of Children" captures the sentiment that children, who naturally see the world in a hundred different ways and appreciate it in as many, are forced through schooling, to see the world through one very specific lens: as the adults around them have dictated it (Malaguzzi, 1998). Much of the child's natural joy is suppressed, as they must experience life in a singular way. Today's children might be at the risk of just such a fate. Testing, accountability, and standardization push an agenda of automaticity, not creativity, and reward consensus, not original thought. For a more democratic and caring educational environment for children then, arts, the humanities, and more interpretive outlets need to be encouraged.

Issues of social class also featured in this study. The social injustice of the situation is that lower income communities do not have easy access to high-quality early childhood educational programs. As was previously mentioned, the National Association for the Education of Young Children provides accreditation for high-quality early childhood centers and programs. Many of these accredited programs exist in communities with higher average education and income levels. The parents at St. Catherine's were involved in their child's education. Many of them said they specifically chose the school for the academic excellence, faith formation, and strong community. Unfortunately, these parents did not have a better awareness of the importance of developmentally appropriate practices for their children. Many parents, as school

alumni, were providing a similar educational experience for their children as they had. This process replicated the same social system.

For children at all socioeconomic levels, parents must have the proper information on what are the best types of educational environments and practices. In the case of this study, parents needed to have more information on the benefits that play has and be cautioned of the negative effects developmentally inappropriate practices can have on students.

Unfortunately, developmentally inappropriate practices are more commonly seen in lower socioeconomic and minority communities. For example, at my school in an affluent suburban area, parents would not support developmentally inappropriate practices within the kindergarten classroom. It is not simply a matter of education, but also a question of values and beliefs about what and how students should be taught in their schools. Parents, teachers, and administrators at St. Catherine expressed their credence in "structure." Thus, in following this value, it is not fitting that students would be allowed time or chances to create their own project, organize a group of students during class time for a common goal, or move about the classroom freely while thinking of ideas for an assignment. In contrast, this would be acceptable at the school where I work because different values are appreciated and cultivated in students. Admittedly, there is also a different attitude among parents. The parents at St. Catherine were shown to follow directions from their child's teacher and school administration. In another community, these authority figures might be questioned or challenged if parents did not agree with their policies or views.

Finally, another potential area that might impact play activities for children is the ever-increasing presence of technology in the curriculum. For example, Fleer (2017) described the

impact digital technology is already beginning to have an on some preschools. This is especially troubling with regard to the growing concern for screen-time and social development in young children (Hill, 2016). Early Childhood educators need to be aware of the ever-evolving challenges to play.

Leadership for Social Justice

Leaders for social justice are called upon to join the effort to return to children the right to play (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). Souto-Manning (2017) challenged leaders and lay people alike to decide whether play is a right or a privilege. Likewise, it is the important role of leaders for social justice to listen to those with the smallest voices: children.

Leaders in the early childhood field must work with parents and educators alike to let them know there are resources that can help them in their advocacy work and connect them with the right people. There is a need for leaders to work with the families to help educate them on developmentally appropriate practice and benefits of play (Miller & Almon, 2009).

Teacher Preparation Programs in Early Childhood

The implications on teacher preparation programs begins with ensuring that early childhood educators are formed with a robust knowledge of child development and how play can be used as a method to promote learning as well as be an end in and of itself for children in kindergarten. Preservice teachers should learn how to incorporate play in academic tasks and be able to articulate to parents, administrators, and other individuals why it is important for children to play (Jung, Zhang, & Zhang, 2016). Teachers who go out into the field must be aware of early childhood education theories and be able to relate these theories to their practices.

Given the findings of this study and how academics are given priority in kindergarten within much of the literature, graduating teachers must be able to defend and advocate for play. On another note, teacher education programs need to teach aspiring educators how to understand the values within a school community. For example, at St. Catherine's school, it became clear that the parents, teachers, and administrators had common values. The same might be true of any school, or there may be factions of belief within a school. In either case, educators need to be able to observe, listen, and interact with parents, students, and their colleagues to understand how a school community approaches education, highlights certain values, and sees itself. To effectively advocate for play within any given community requires an appreciation of that community and its approach to education.

Future Research

It is advisable to replicate the current study at another school, perhaps one with a different socioeconomic status, geographic region, and philosophy of education to reveal a broader vision of how parents, teachers, and administrators think about play. Expanding the study to look at kindergarten programs in public school settings would be equally sensible. Finally, a way to further increase the social justice component of the current study is to find a way to include the voices of students in the study. As has been discussed, these students are often subject to the decisions of adults and there is a great need to have research that includes student perspectives, especially at this age-level.

Methodological Implications

This study focused on parent, teacher, and administrator perceptions of play in the kindergarten classroom. Yet student voices were not directly heard in this study. Due to concerns

with receiving Institutional Review Board permission to work with students, this study did not include student participants. However, this does not mean that students should be excluded from research. In fact, the study may have been strengthened with the student perspective. Then all affected parties—parents, teachers, administrators, and students—would have been addressed. Here are some examples of how other researchers used appropriate methodologies that included children's perspectives.

A recent study by Colliver and Fleer (2016) asked young children about their perspective on learning through play. One way the researchers were able to get honest answers from the children was to take the "least adult role" in interacting with children. This approach allowed children to feel comfortable talking with the research team.

Another possibility is to adopt a methodology for children to draw or express through their writing how they are feeling (Dyson, 1997). This process helps children feel more comfortable while attention goes to the paper or picture they draw while the adult begins to interpret and ask questions in a way that takes the focus away from directly questioning child.

To help with classroom observations, I created an Observation Protocol (Appendix F) that served to be very valuable in noting how play was used in the classroom. For other practitioners, this tool can be very useful in making classroom observations in early childhood education settings as well as in elementary education. The Observation Protocol was helpful because it divided the observation into looking at the environment that the teacher set up as well as into the activities that were occurring in the classroom. Administrators, mentor teachers, and even teacher education programs would be able to use this observation protocol both as a tool for classroom use as well as a discussion piece for describing the early childhood education theory

behind each section of the protocol. When using it as a reflective exercise, teachers can apply the protocol to consider how they might teach a lesson by addressing multiple areas of their pedagogy.

Recommendations

The following section presents recommendations based on the study findings and the implications these findings have on various constituencies.

St. Catherine's School

As part of this study, I was fortunate enough to become acquainted with the vibrant community at St. Catherine. My personal interactions with the administration, teachers, parents, and students made a powerful impression on me as I learned how warm, welcoming, and passionate the school community was about their approach to education and their role in supporting students. It was impressive to see how unified the community was in its approach to educating the whole child in a way that combined focus on academic success with character development and spiritual growth.

The staff at St. Catherine was very professional, and I could tell they believed in collaborating with each other in order to create the best educational experience for their students. The administrators and teachers I interacted with for this study seem eager to learn about what else they could do to improve their school and educational program. I sensed deep pride in the school, its offerings, and what its students were able to accomplish.

With regard to the kindergarten program specifically, I would recommend that the teachers find ways to incorporate play into the curriculum. One idea for doing this would be to incorporate literacy and math centers during their language arts and math instruction. The

kindergarten program did an exceptional job teaching students how to navigate the classroom-learning environment and practice life-long learning skills, such as raising one's hand, following directions, and listening to the teacher. As the literature demonstrates, students can greatly benefit from freedom in movement, hands-on exploration of manipulatives, and practice with didactic games (Froebel, 1891; Montessori, 1912; Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978) as offered during centers. Learning centers, especially when students rotate through them in small groups of three or in pairs, allow students to socialize, practice self-regulation, and social skills while addressing academic content. Additionally, incorporating centers in language arts and math provides teachers an opportunity to meet with small groups of students for targeted instruction. This would allow teachers to differentiate instruction so that individual needs are addressed, and each child is continually challenged or supported as needed by the teacher.

From a classroom management perspective, it might seem overwhelming or daunting to consider adopting learning centers and activities to the curriculum. However, given the strong classroom management skills of the teachers at St. Catherine, I have every confidence that if the teachers and administrators decided this was something they would like to try to incorporate into their learning program, the teachers would be able to add this with guidance and coaching.

Currently, lesson plans at St. Catherine revealed that math centers are incorporated once a week in the classroom. Teachers already had an idea about how to teach students to rotate through centers. The next step would be to use this platform and expand upon it. Perhaps students could also use recording worksheets or take some time after centers are cleaned up to share with the class something they learned about or practiced during the allotted rotation time.

While it would be simple to offer this recommendation to incorporate more play into the curriculum at St. Catherine, the true next step for school would be to begin a conversation about current practices and preferences for how to continue to explore teaching and learning. The findings from this study suggest that parents, teachers, and administrators are satisfied with the way kindergarten and transitional kindergarten are run at St. Catherine. Since this is the case, perhaps a conversation on curriculum would touch upon whether the interested parties would like to make any updates or adjustments to the curriculum and the methodologies used. Teachers should be encouraged to dialogue with other kindergarten and transitional kindergarten teachers at outside schools to see how they can share and learn about practices that work at other schools, especially those that incorporate play in the curriculum.

From there, an event for parents would also be beneficial that covers the research-based benefits of play for children. At this event, parents should also be presented with resources on ways they can support learning at home through playful activities so students can continue to practice their academic skills while doing so in a way that is developmentally appropriate. For example, students can practice letter formation or writing in ways that are more sensory, as in by tracing them in sand, rock salt, or with playdoh. Parents should be supported with similar resources for language arts, religion, science, and social studies.

Another recommendation is for parents and teachers to work together to rewrite the curriculum based on information such as developmentally appropriate practice and conversations that stem from concerns regarding the curriculum. Even as parents and teachers discuss what has changed in the curriculum and what has remained can allow both parties to consider what has been done and what needs to be adjusted in terms of the curriculum.

Such recommendations, when adopted and embraced by the school community, have the greatest potential to make lasting contributions on the curricular experience for kindergarten students at St. Catherine's school. Again, the idea should be that the parents, teachers, and administrators join together and discuss whether they would like to proceed on this path. It is my recommendation that they do so in order to create a diverse and rich learning experience for their children that addresses a range of skills, including cognitive and social-emotional ones, in addition to academic and character based as it currently stands.

Other Schools

My recommendation for other schools is to consider the findings of this study and other research that shows play is disappearing from kindergarten (Cheng, 2012; Clarke, 2014; Hipsher, 2014; Medellin, 2015; Miller & Almon, 2009; Wan, 2014). While it is important for our kindergarten students to be prepared for the academic demands of an ever-increasing technological world, we, as educators, should also focus on the practices we choose that allow students the chance play. As the Reggio-Emilia movement in early childhood education demonstrates (Edwards et al., 1998), childhood is a special time that should be cherished and celebrated, not rushed or taken for granted. As schools consider their curricula and methodologies, play and its penchant for creativity, exploration and socialization should be valorized. Schools should reflect on their practices and decide how they can take measures to incorporate play into the curriculum. As the literature demonstrates, academic benchmarks can still be achieved using play-based practices (Piaget, 1962; Wan, 2014).

The National Association for the Education of Young Children advocates for rigorous early childhood education programs, founded in early childhood theories and best practices

(Lopez, 2015). However, this is only helpful as far as preschool programs go. Kindergarten and transitional kindergarten programs, such as the one I observed at St. Catherine School, get lost to the accreditation process offered by the National Association for the Education of Young Children because they are housed in larger elementary school settings. Part of the challenge is that kindergarten itself has become distanced from early childhood education and is more likely to be taken within the context of the elementary schooling (Miller & Almon, 2009). Attention should be placed upon evaluating kindergarten programs as early childhood education centers housed within schools so that real attention can be given to evaluating how those programs attend to early childhood needs.

Administrators

The recommendation for administrators is to reflect on practices that are used in kindergarten and to decide whether their school's kindergarten program allows students a fair amount of play each day. Administrators should also consider the research presented in this study and reflect upon what is lost to children when they are not allowed to play, explore, and direct their own learning. The research presented in this study should give pause to administrators who demand their kindergarten teachers reduce or eliminate early childhood pedagogical practices from kindergarten. As the study has demonstrated through literature from the field, play benefits child development and growth. Using this information, administrators need to support their teachers in learning about how to incorporate play into the regular school day. This might mean guiding teachers themselves, facilitating professional development, or setting up structures that support teachers and their colleagues as they work toward incorporating play into the curriculum. Administrators also need to communicate with parents why play is

necessary in kindergarten. If a school chooses to adopt more play-based practices into the curriculum, the administration needs to be supportive of teachers and parents who may not be familiar with the benefits of play. It is also the administrator's job to communicate her belief in this type of approach to the kindergarten curriculum. As the findings of this study and literature demonstrate, teachers often worry about how their administrators will perceive of play within the classroom as chaotic or without purpose. Administrators need to share with teachers their belief in play and its benefits for student success when it occurs in the classroom.

Parents

My recommendation for parents is to be advocates for play in their child's kindergarten experience. As findings from this study demonstrate, not all parents see their role as speaking up about the curriculum. Depending on the school community, parents have varying levels of involvement in curriculum development. Despite this reality, parents should be informed of the benefits of play and approach teachers, administrators, and other groups at schools that have the ability to increase play in the kindergarten curriculum. Parents should ask questions to learn what practices the school utilizes and how these practices align with research in enhancing their child's learning experience. One recommendation would be for parents to form book clubs or small study groups so they can sit together and discuss one topic related to their area of interest.

Teachers

As shared in the section on implications, teachers should do what they can within their classroom to incorporate play into the kindergarten curriculum. While teachers are often at the mercy of school policies and administrator preferences, they do have agency and autonomy to a certain extent and can use practices, such as play, to enhance their students' learning experience.

Teachers should reflect on their own practices and personal relationship with play in the classroom. They should consider what they like about it, what challenges them to incorporate it, and finally, identify how they can make little changes toward the larger goal of including more play into the regular school day. While it may be overwhelming to do so, teachers who are interested in using this methodology should find other teachers with similar philosophies, learn together, and support each other in this venture. Teachers also have a responsibility to educate themselves on the benefits play can have for their students in case they receive pushback from parents or administrators. Being knowledgeable of current research will greatly help in this area.

Teacher Preparation Programs

Teacher preparation programs need to make it a priority to teach aspiring early childhood educators, such as kindergarten, transitional kindergarten, and even first-grade teachers, about the importance of play to child development. Additionally, preservice teachers need to have opportunities to learn about how to integrate play-based practices with academic content (Lewis, 2017; Weisberg et al., 2016). With this approach, novice teachers with some experience and background in using play for academic purposes as well as the means in and of themselves will only begin to bring play back into the kindergarten classroom.

With proper training, preservice teachers will be able to articulate the benefits play has to parents, colleagues, and future administrators. All teachers need to be able to defend play and emphasize its importance to early childhood education. Finally, I would recommend that preservice teachers have some experience learning how to set-up, run, and adapt learning centers to incorporate play into the curriculum (Lewis, 2015). From a management point of view, preservice teachers need guidance and support in choosing this type of methodology, and it is the

responsibility of teacher preparation programs to provide it. For example, preservice teachers should observe classrooms that use such practices, pair up with mentor teachers who use play successfully in the classroom, and have an opportunity to create or implement play in one of their courses. The more opportunity teacher education programs provide for students to feel comfortable with this teaching methodology, the better chance children have of working with well-trained teachers who know how to incorporate play into the curriculum.

Also, the study demonstrated the need for more early childhood backgrounds for teachers in kindergarten and transitional kindergarten classrooms. It cannot be assumed that just because a teacher has experience in the primary grade levels (first or second grade) that the teacher will be able to use the same pedagogical skill set to teach kindergarten. For the sake of the students in the class, kindergarten teachers should be trained and supported in early childhood education theory and pedagogy.

Reflections on the Current Study

This study has been a labor of love. My passion for early childhood and Catholic education intersected in a way I did not anticipate would be as rewarding and challenging as it was in developing, executing, and considering the results of this study. As an educator, I found that undertaking this project pushed me to become an expert in a field I have only known for the last five years, and yet consumes me morning and night.

It has been a pleasure to connect with the other kindergarten teachers at the study site. I feel that our relationship is only beginning, and I am excited to continue the collegial relationship we developed over the course of this study. In this way, this work on kindergarten and curriculum will continue.

Part of the challenge this study pushed me to work through was my relationship with Catholic education and being able to approach it with a critical lens. As I mentioned, my own K–12 educational experience was in the Los Angeles Archdiocese and, as a child, I could not have asked for a better opportunity to learn and grow both academically and in my faith. I even taught in a public school setting for four years before being called back home to Catholic education. In this way, selecting a site so close to home, both literally and figuratively, forced me to "grow up" in my relationship with Catholic education; I had to remove my rose-colored glasses and put on my critical lenses. Though this process was challenging because I had to recognize some shortcomings and flaws with Catholic education, I felt like my appreciation of Catholic education was deepened as I recognized Catholic education has strengths and room to expand as it addresses its weaknesses.

As the study findings indicate, developmentally inappropriate practices were in used in kindergarten at St. Catherine's. Yet, by the school's definition, its students were "successful" with regard to achievement and moral development; St. Catherine students were courteous, friendly, respectful, and kind.

It was difficult for me to question practices that deliver great results. I was reluctant to say the pedagogies and practices at St. Catherine's were misaligned with early childhood theory. However, I recognize my unique position and responsibility to call the situation what it is: an opportunity for growth. My knowledge of developmentally appropriate practices and my familiarity with the literature from the field demands that I bring into awareness how inappropriate practices can be harmful for students in a Catholic school. "Old school" policies

and classroom management styles that run the classroom in an authoritarian fashion should not continue if we mean to be true to our philosophy of nurturing each student as a child of God.

Conclusion

Connection to Leadership and Social Justice

This study pushed me to explore what it means for play to disappear from kindergarten. My own experience as a kindergarten teacher and my personal interactions with kindergarten students each day for the past five years has driven me to be a staunch advocate for children and their right to play. So often I have witnessed how kindergarten students are subject to curricular decisions by their parents, teachers, and administrators that sound good on paper or through policies, but are out of touch with student developmental needs. Therefore, I present this study, its findings, implications, and recommendations as a way to responsibly do my part as an advocate for play in kindergarten. In my personal practice, I have found that this is both a leadership challenge and social justice issue. What I have learned through research on this topic pushes me to stand as a leader for the students I teach, those I will teach in the future, and the teachers I hope to influence through my own practices and experience. After all, the children are worth it. If research shows us that play has significant benefits, we, as educators, leaders, parents, administrators, and responsible citizens, should be doing all that we can to create an environment hospitable to such practices.

I would like this study to be part of the discourse on play in kindergarten, but more so, to be part of the effort to remove the stigma "play" holds in an academic environment. Findings from this study and, indeed, values in our larger society pit "work" and "play" against each other. Work and play seem to exist in a binary relationship at opposite ends of a spectrum that

never seem to wrap around. Instead, I propose we dismantle and reimagine this mentality. Work and play *can* coincide, coexist, and cooperate in schools if only given a chance. Parents, teachers, and administrators need to see how this is possible. When students are given a chance to practice their academic skills through play, they are happier to "work." Especially at the kindergarten level, students who play, when given the opportunity and guided by informed educators, will choose activities they enjoy, and develop a multitude of skills: academic, social, emotional, physical, and metacognitive as well.

Thus, this study is part of the movement to return to play in kindergarten as the answer to the study's title, "When do we play?" which the findings suggest is "not now." We can keep the academic rigor as long-term methods to achieve how these goals are approached with child development in mind and as long as teachers, students, and parents are supported in this endeavor. Play must be a central feature in this decision. The risks of further removing play from kindergarten and distilling it from early childhood education will have vast repercussions for our students.

Expanding out more broadly, the integrity of our democratic society will suffer if play further disappears or becomes absent from early childhood education. As the literature and findings from this study demonstrated, play holds many benefits for healthy children and communities. First, through child-directed free play, children take an active role in their world. Without this opportunity to play, children who are always following adults or teachers can lose the feeling that they are in control of their own lives. They can become less confident adults, as they may not have had time to develop their own interests, passions, and self-efficacy. Thus, play provides a foundational opportunity for children to begin developing their sense of agency. In the

same way, we hope our citizens will believe and understand they should take an active role in their democracy. Secondly, play, most of which is social, allows children a chance to practice taking on and imagining different roles. As children play out pretend scenarios they are building their understanding of multiple perspectives. During the game, children learn how to modify rules, scenarios, and even roles to accommodate others. These skills are vastly important in considering that a democratic society appreciates multiple perspectives and acknowledges natural differences in its citizenry. Just as children practice listening, understanding, negotiating, and showing compassion during these make-believe scenarios, so too will they as adults through the democratic process.

Another important aspect that is critical for a democratic society is the ability to have citizens who are levelheaded, patient, and self-aware. Play affords children a sort of "testing ground" for life. Through play, children are able to test their theories, limits, make modifications, and learn from others as well as their own experiences.

Social play especially allows children the chance to learn coping skills and listen to others. When disagreements occur, or the give-and-take of sharing comes up, children can learn the skills they will need to participate in a democratic society. The skills children can develop through play include learning how to make decisions, problem solve, make and negotiate rules, and collaborate with others are of utmost importance to raising competent citizens who can navigate peacefully in society. Especially at a time when more and more children are spending time alone on social media or having virtual conversations instead of face-to-face ones, the importance of having children play together, both in and out of schools, cannot be understated.

Our task therefore is to protect children's right to play and to advocate for its return to prominence within the kindergarten classroom.

Appendix A

Parent Participant Questionnaire

Please select your response:

_____ Yes, I am willing to participate in the study.	_____ No, I decline to participate.

First Name (only) _____

Contact email or phone number _____

For each row, circle your answer. You can Decline to answer any question.

How long have you been affiliated with the school (as a parent, parishioner, or another way)?	New family	0-2 years	3-5 years	6 or more	Decline

Sex	Male	Female	Decline

Age	20s	30s	40s	50s	60s	Decline

Highest Level of Education	High school	Some College	Bachelor's Degree	Graduate Degree	Decline

Ethnicity	Hispanic/ Latino	Asian/ Pacific Islander	Pacific Islander	Non-Hispanic White	African American	Decline

Appendix B

Interview Protocol for Administrators

1. Tell me about your journey into becoming _____ at this school.
    a. (Generally) I notice_____, can you tell me more about how that particular experience shapes your approach to this school community?

Curriculum

2. I know schools have varying models and stakeholders involved in designing and implementing curriculum, can you share what the curriculum design process is like here?
    a. Who are the people involved? What is their responsibility or role?
    b. Who do you wish was more involved? Why?
    c. What's are some things you do as part of this process?

3. At this school, how do parents fit into decisions regarding the curriculum?
    a. Can you provide an example of their involvement in the process or give specifics as to how they are involved in implementing the curriculum?
4. Are there any processes or activities (formal or informal) for parents to provide feedback?

5. How do you support teachers in implementing the curriculum?
6. Are there any methodologies or approaches that you like to see, especially in kindergarten?
7. I noticed you review lesson plans. Can you tell me more about that process?
    a. Sometimes you add comments, "good" or "nice,"…What are you looking for in the plans?
8. In your daily responsibilities, can you provide examples of how you help teachers implement the curriculum?
9. From an admin level, what do you to support K teachers in their practice?

Kindergarten, Curriculum, (and Play)

10. Tell me about your kindergarten program here. What are some program highlights or features that you are most proud of?

11. Think if you were hiring for Kindergarten teachers and teacher's assistants, what are some qualifications, experiences, or perspectives that you would look for to decide if the person would be a good fit for Kindergarten here?

12. What are some of the guiding principles on the primary level behavior expectations?
13. Can you tell me more about how these expectations were drafted? Who was involved in the process?

14. Can you please tell me about the school virtues?
15. How were these virtues chosen?

16. Who was involved and what was the process like to adopt them?
17. How are they used in the curriculum or school culture?

Focus on Kindergarten Day

18. From an admin perspective, what should students do in K?

19. What do you like to see when you visit the K classes?

20. What should class time be spent on?
21. For you, what is "non-negotiable" that teachers MUST make time for in the day?

22. How do you see play incorporated into your K classes?
23. What do you consider "play"? How would you characterize it?

24. What are some challenges to integrating play in the curriculum?
    a. What do you mean by...
25. How does the school or community expectations factor in?
    a. (How have you been able to foster this culture/environment?)

26. Is there anything else about curriculum design and implementation, parent involvement, or kindergarten you would like to add to this discussion? Perhaps something else came to mind?

Appendix C

Interview Protocol for Parents

School Identity

1. What led to your decision to enroll your child in kindergarten here?
    a. Community, outside reputation, family connections, location, cost, approach to teaching/learning, etc.

2. Tell me about the kindergarten program here.
    a. What are some program highlights or features that you recommend about this school?
    b. How would you describe it to potential families looking to enroll?

Expectations of K

3. What do you expect from your child's kindergarten year?
4. What do you hope they will be able to learn/do?
5. How do you see the curriculum supporting this goal?

6. What do you expect from your child's teacher this year?
    a. I.e. Academics, approach to teaching/learning, communication?
7. What do you understand your role to be in supporting your kindergarten student? How has this been communicated to you? Indirectly or directly?

Curriculum and Play in K

8. To your knowledge, how do parents influence or provide feedback on the curriculum at this school?
9. Is there anything so far (about what students learn) that you would like to change or adjust?
10. What would you like to add to the kindergarten experience that you have not seen as of now?
11. Who at the school, do you feel you could speak to about this?

12. Thinking of your child and children at this age: How do you define play?
13. What are some activities your child enjoys doing?
14. Can you describe some benefits you see when children play?

15. How much do you think children should play in kindergarten?
    a. Aside from recess/lunch, do you think time should be designated for students to play in the classroom? Why or why not?
16. Has your child described play in the classroom?
17. How would you say kindergarten is different today than when you were in school?
18. In your opinion, what are the pros and cons of this difference for children today?

Appendix D

Interview Protocol for Teachers

1. Tell me about your journey into teaching _____ at this school.

    1. I notice_____, can you tell me more about how that particular experience shapes your approach to this school community?

Curriculum

2. What's the curriculum design process here? How do you decide on themes, units, lessons?
    a. Who is involved? What is their responsibility or role?
    b. Who do you wish was more involved? Why?
3. What are some things you do as part of this process?
4. In your methodology you also use: "I, We, Two, and You." What does this mean? Why is this important?

5. I noticed your school virtues (Motivation, creativity, gratitude, responsibility, honesty, forgiveness, school pride, dependability, and teamwork) are posted. How were these virtues decided or created? Do they influence your lessons/activities during the month?

6. At this school, how do parents fit into decisions regarding the curriculum?
    a. Can you provide an example of their involvement in the process or give specifics as to how they are involved in implementing the curriculum?
7. What are parent responsibilities with regards to student learning? What do you expect them to do?
8. What do you think parents expect from teachers regarding the kindergarten curriculum?

9. How are you supported in implementing the curriculum?
    a. Either by principal?
    b. Parents?
    c. Workshops or PD?
10. What are other resources you wish you had?

Kindergarten, Curriculum, (and Play)

11. Tell me about your kindergarten program here. What are some program highlights or features that you are most proud of?

12. Let's talk about the primary level behavior expectations.

a) (Can you tell me more about how these expectations were drafted? Who was involved in the process?)

b) How do these guidelines influence what you do in the classroom? For example, how do they relate to the activities you select for lessons?

13. Are there any that are particularly challenging to implement for this age group?

a) Are there any expectations you would want to change, add, or get rid of?

<u>Focus on Kindergarten Day</u>

14. Teaching K: What do you think you spend most of your time working on?
    a. When you are at school, is there one area that takes more time than others? (Academics, assessments, planning, management, or something else?)
    b. What do you think there is not enough time for? Either for you or students? Why?

15. Since your schedule puts all specials (music, art, P.E, Spanish, computers) in one day, how do you manage the energy level throughout the day so students stay focused and fresh?

16. What should class time be spent on?
    a. Are you able to dedicate enough time to this?
    b. What gets in the way? What takes too much time?

17. How do you incorporate play into your classroom?

18. During free time,
    a. What are some things you do?
    b. What are some activities that students enjoy most?
    c. Do you find any challenges to free time?
    d. How do you think administrators or parents see free time?

19. What are some challenges to integrating play in the curriculum?
    a. What do you mean by...
    b. How does the school or community expectations factor in?

20. Is there anything else about curriculum design and implementation, parent involvement, or kindergarten you would like to add to this discussion? Perhaps something else came to mind?

21. [How are class sizes decided/ students per class decided?]

22. *[Can you tell me more about your lesson plans? I noticed you use R (reason) and FA. What do those stand for?]*

Appendix E

Invitation to Participate/ Recruitment Letter

Parent Recruitment Letter

Greetings! My name is Aimee Ramirez, and I am a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership and Social Justice program at Loyola Marymount University. I am also a kindergarten teacher in our Archdiocese, a product of K-12 Catholic education (St. Stephens in Monterey Park and Ramona Convent), and Montebello native.

I am seeking parent participants for a research study entitled, "When Do We Play?": Administrator, Teacher, and Parent Perceptions of Play in a Catholic Kindergarten Classroom. Using a Catholic school as the context, the study focuses on how parents, teachers, and administrators view play in the kindergarten curriculum. It also seeks to relate these ideas about play with its implementation in the kindergarten classroom. Willing participants are required to have children enrolled in kindergarten.

The study will be conducted during October and November 2016. It will include interviews with kindergarten teachers, school administrators, classroom observations of kindergarten activities, and a document review of some lesson plans and school publications.

Parent participation will involve one or two, forty-five to one-hour long interviews in which you will answer questions about your views on play in kindergarten and how it is implemented in your child's classroom. Interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Participants will be able to review and approve interview transcripts. All interviews will be kept confidential and without any personal identifiers.

Please complete the short questionnaire attached here and deliver it in the provided envelope, sealed to the school office. You can choose to participate in this study or decline to participate. Indicate your decision on the questionnaire and return your form as soon as possible. Remember, participation is voluntary. Those selected for the study will be contacted to schedule a convenient date and time for the interview. If you have any questions, feel free to email me at aramir46@lion.lmu.edu or call/text me at (213) 446-3379.

Thank you!

Aimee Ramirez
Doctoral Candidate - Loyola Marymount University
Kindergarten Teacher

Appendix F
Classroom Observation Protocol

Classroom Observation Protocol

Observation #:	Date:	Classroom:

Focus of Observation:

Start Time:	End Time:	

Environment	*Activities*	*Reflective Notes*
Teacher interaction (tone, physial proximity, language)	Initiation (student or teacher? Specific or open-ended?)	
Sound (pleasant converastion, spontaneous laughter, excitenetn, enforced quiet)	Purpose (constructive play, exploratory, group-oriented, academic)	
Discipline (redirection, positive reinforcement, encouragement, guidance, techniques)	Choice (different activities offered?, ways to promote involvement, materials)	
Materials (availability, variation, option for choice, open or close-ended?)	Movement (freedom vs. restriction, pacing, rules/ routines)	
Space (location, organization)	Motivation (ways students are involved/engaged)	

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