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INFLUENCES ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF GUIDED PLAY PRACTICES IN KINDERGARTEN: A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY

By

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Abstract

INFLUENCES ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF GUIDED PLAY PRACTICES IN KINDERGARTEN: A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY

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University of Nebraska, 2020

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The professional capacity of a kindergarten teacher is central to the implementation of developmentally appropriate practices that support children’s learning and development. Evidence indicates that a teacher’s professional capacity is influenced through experiences with leadership, professional learning, and collaboration. Although research clearly supports the positive impact of play experiences for young children, the current educational climate does not provide teachers with the confidence or the structural supports needed to actualize play in kindergarten classrooms. The findings demonstrate what influences kindergarten teachers to implement guided play practices in their classrooms. The implications provide insight as to which elements of leadership, professional learning, and collaboration are most influential. A theory of change demonstrates how to impact quality play experiences in support of children’s learning and development.
Dedication

I dedicate this work to my family. To my parents Kitty and Larry, who always believed I could do anything and taught me to believe it, too. Thank you for devoting your time and using your skills as life-long readers to edit my draft. To my husband Troy, whose support made my multi-tasking, decades long journey as a wife, a mom, an educator, and a graduate student possible. To my talented daughter, Anna who patiently contributed her graphic design student skills to create figures to represent my thinking. To my son, Aidan who allowed me to share his kindergarten story and helped with editing. This dissertation has been a family affair. You are all my greatest blessings.

The path to a doctoral degree is a journey. I have walked mine with exceptional colleagues who have inspired me along the way. To Nancy, who believed in kindergarten play practices and encouraged me to teach from my heart. To Donna, who modeled a playful and joyous classroom. To my preschool sisters, who learned with me through the most significant experience of my professional career, Alyssa, Bridget, Kayla, Keeley, Nicole, and Taelyr. To Kanyon, who walked this doctoral path with me and filled it with persistent laughter even though “statistics isn’t supposed to be that fun.” There have been many more and I am grateful for all they have taught me.

I dedicate this work to the play leadership team. Your commitment to your students and to one another is inspirational. Thank you for welcoming me into your circle and letting me learn from you. I have enjoyed my experiences with your team and with this study every step of the way. Keep being amazing and leading for children. You make a difference.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

In 2009, my son Aidan entered kindergarten and began his K-12 school experience. Aidan was born a learner. He was curious. He was a listener. He was a talker. He was a pleaser. He loved superheroes and matchbox cars. He loved playing with his lightsaber in the backyard, battling the neighbor boys. He loved swimming and climbing on the playground. He loved building creations out of blocks with his older sister. He loved to read, help me bake cookies, and care for our pets. He was a typical five-year-old boy.

I was excited for my brilliant and loving little boy to enter the world of elementary school to strengthen his blossoming reading and math skills, to play at centers with his friends, and to love school as much as he already loved to learn. Just 3 years before, when my daughter entered kindergarten, kindergarten classrooms were filled with joy and playful learning. By 2009, the kindergarten classroom my son entered looked much different. The housekeeping center, dollhouse, blocks area, and art area were gone. The kindergarten classroom looked like what I thought of as a first-grade classroom, dominated by furniture designed for independent seatwork. The daily schedule was structured with teacher-directed, worksheet-based lessons and without opportunities for exploration or child-initiated learning. Unlike his older sister, Aidan received limited opportunities to be curious, to talk, or to play. Kindergarten for him was not a place of joy where a small child could learn to love school. For him, school was a place of business.
My own children’s differing kindergarten experiences (within just three short years of time) illustrate how our nation’s kindergarten classrooms have changed. Playful learning has lost priority to more time spent in teacher-directed seatwork. In the years since the implementation of No Child Left Behind (U.S. Department of Education, 2005), there has been a decrease in the amount of time kindergarten children in the United States spend playing in their classrooms (Bassok, Latham, & Rorem, 2016). There are many factors that have led to this change, including elevated pressure for children to pass high-stakes tests later in the elementary years. A recent study confirms this phenomenon by providing “careful documentation of very large changes in kindergarten over a relatively short, 12-year period. Our findings suggest a shift toward more challenging (and potentially more engaging) literacy and math content. However, they also highlight a concerning drop in time spent on art, music, science, and child-selected activities, as well as much more frequent use of standardized testing” (Bassok, Latham, & Rorem, 2016, p. 15).

A critical question emerges from this, how can early childhood professionals maintain the positive shift toward more challenging and engaging literacy and math without compromising developmentally appropriate play practices for young children? The answer lies not in eliminating play from kindergarten classrooms, but in building the professional capacity of kindergarten teachers. With strong professional capacity teachers are able to more effectively organize play environments and support children’s play experiences so that play opportunities connect to standards AND promote the development of the whole child. High standards and play practices are not in competition, but can be mutually reinforcing when facilitated by highly skilled teachers.
There is a depth of misunderstanding surrounding the educational and developmental benefits of play for young children and this creates a complex problem with the implementation of play practices in kindergarten classrooms across the nation. Fortunately, a paradigm shift is beginning to happen in some districts, including the district involved in this study. District leaders and teacher leaders are embracing the positive impacts of play and working to expand play opportunities in kindergarten classrooms. Implementation progress is steady. Time allotments for play have been included in the daily schedule, a small budget for purchasing play materials has been included in the annual budget, and the district has developed written resources as guidance for teachers and administrators. These provide a foundation and a great start, but implementation of high-quality play practices that are effective at increasing children’s developmental and academic outcomes depends upon the knowledge, attitude, skill, aspiration, and behavior of the teachers themselves (Killion, 2017). Explicit attention to building the capacity of the kindergarten teachers is vital.

The findings in this grounded theory study will provide insights into kindergarten teachers’ perspectives about what influences and supports them to enhance guided play practices in their classrooms in support of children’s learning and development. Findings will be utilized to inform district and building level decision-making on how to effectively develop teachers’ professional capacity so that kindergarten classrooms can bring back the play practices of the past while also enhancing them to provide the enriched math and literacy experiences of the present. In doing this, kindergarten students of the future will benefit from rigorous AND playful learning so that my son Aidan’s kindergarten story will be a historical account of the past and not the current reality.
Problem Statement

In the years since the implementation of No Child Left Behind (U.S. Department of Education, 2018) there has been a decrease in the amount of time preschool and kindergarten children in the United States spend playing in their classrooms. Pressure to pass high-stakes tests later in the elementary years prompted principals and other school leaders to pressure teachers to step away from play practices toward more skill-based learning.

With limited opportunities for play, children miss out on critical, developmentally appropriate practices that provide a solid foundation for successful life-long learning. Research supports the value of play in children’s development. “Play is important for brain, cognitive, linguistic, physical, psychological, and social-emotional development and well-being” (Wood, 2014, p. 48). Research informs us that play is beneficial in supporting children’s development of 21st century skills. “If children lack opportunities to experience such play, their long-term capacities related to metacognition, problem solving, and social cognition—as well as to academic areas such as literacy, mathematics, and science—may be diminished” (Gmitrova & Gmitrov, 2003, p. 246). When young children are not provided with opportunities to engage in play, creative development is hindered. “The creative process is seen as a sequence through which the creative person proceeds in clarifying a problem, working on it, and producing a solution that resolves the difficulty” (Edwards, 2009, p. 58). Engagement in this process within the context of play is critical to successful, life-long learning.
Lack of access to play is not just problematic during children’s formative years, it also limits later learning potential as children grow. It is not just an issue for teachers and school leaders, but for all members of our global society. If we want children to grow to be successful workers, colleagues, parents, and community members who add to a productive and peaceful world it is vital that we find a way to increase and enhance the implementation of play practices in our early childhood classrooms. Quality leadership supports, professional learning opportunities, and stable structures for collaboration are key to developing this in kindergarten classrooms.

Momentum is beginning to build about play’s potential to support rigorous learning opportunities and build a solid foundation for later school and life success.

“Research and recommendations from professional organizations like NAEYC and the National Association of Elementary School Principals bolster confidence in the value of playful learning experiences. Make-believe or role play, playful investigation of materials and ideas, playing games with rules, engaging in vigorous outdoor play—all of these will build knowledge, skills, and positive attitudes toward learning. Participating in rich pretend play can encourage dual language learners and children with language delays to use more complex language. Playful activities help children with disabilities become more engaged—and we know greater engagement predicts better outcomes. Play can help children who struggle with self-regulation become better able to manage their emotions, ideas, and behaviors. By incorporating play experiences that are well-aligned with the Common Core State Standards and other early learning standards, teachers can promote positive outcomes for all children without discouraging them from the joy of learning” (Wood, 2014, p. 56).
Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this constructivist grounded theory study will be to understand kindergarten teachers’ perceptions of how their experiences with the structures of leadership, professional learning, and collaboration have facilitated the building of their professional capacity to effectively enhance play practices in their classrooms. An in-depth investigation of the kindergarten teachers’ efforts to expand play practices will be conducted. The study will provide a clearer picture of what supported the teachers’ engagement in this project and what supports will be most effective when spreading efforts to build the professional capacity of more teachers district-wide.

Central Question

This constructivist grounded theory study is guided by the following research question and sub-questions:

- What professional capacity building structures influence kindergarten teachers’ implementation of guided play practices?
  - What district and building level leadership practices do kindergarten teachers identify as influencing their implementation of guided play?
  - What professional learning experiences do kindergarten teachers identify as influencing their implementation of guided play?
  - What collaboration experiences with colleagues do kindergarten teachers identify as influencing their implementation of guided play practices?
Operational Definitions

Collaboration: The act of working together with others to create something or meet a common goal.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP)- A framework designed to promote young children’s optimal learning and development. Educators of all ages of children utilize this framework of best practices to make decisions by considering what they know about child development and learning, each child as an individual, and each child’s social and cultural context (Copple, Carol; Bredekamp, Sue; Koralek, 2014).

Guided Play- A type of play that is child-directed in nature, supported by adult mentorship, and focused on learning outcomes (Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Kittredge, & Klahr, 2016).

Leadership: The act of leading, providing guidance, and giving direction for what happens in school districts, buildings, and classrooms.

NAEYC- Acronym for the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

“NAEYC is the national voice of the early childhood community” (NAEYC, 2020, p. 1).

Play- Experiences in a variety of both informal and formal settings which provide children opportunities to exercise (a) active engagement, (b) intrinsic motivation, (c) determination, and (d) intentionality (Oxford Dictionary, 2019; Van Hoorn, Judith; Monighan Nourot, Patricia; Rodriguez Alward, Keith; Scales, 2014).

Play leadership team- A cohort of kindergarten teachers from a variety of schools chosen to lead the Transforming Kindergarten project in the school district.
Professional capacity building- The process of developing and strengthening the skills, instincts, abilities, processes, and resources that promote successful teaching practices. Structures that support professional capacity building include leadership, professional learning, and collaboration (Buffett Early Childhood Institute, 2019; Wikipedia, 2016).

Professional capacity building structures- Supports in place in a school or district that provide guidance, encouragement, and assistance for building professional capacity. The structures investigated in this study include leadership, professional learning, and collaboration.

Professional Learning: Opportunities for educators to develop knowledge and build skills necessary to support students to access a high-quality education.

Purposeful Play- Terminology selected by staff school district involved in this study to identify their focused efforts to expand play practices in kindergarten classrooms. Purposeful play is when kindergarten students are provided the time, materials, environment and adult support to play. Purposeful play is supported by intentional teacher planning and staging the classroom environment so creativity and exploration meet the state standards.

Transforming Kindergarten project- The name of the school district’s project aimed at elevating purposeful play practices in kindergarten classrooms.

**Delimitations**

The delimitations of this grounded theory study include three categories: (a) setting; (b) participants; and (c) researcher relationships. The study involves a focus on
one school district with a student population of approximately 52,000. There are different structural supports and systems for leadership, professional learning, and collaboration in a larger district than there might be in a smaller district. The context of the setting is also unique because district leaders explicitly support and encourage play practices in kindergarten classrooms. This explicit focus is not common among school districts.

The participants interviewed are also unique in that they have been engaged as part of a kindergarten teacher leadership cohort focused specifically on developing and planning for play practices. Assumptions include that these particular teachers are proponents of play and have had additional opportunities to engage with leadership, professional learning, and collaboration in comparison to their colleagues.

The participants in this study have an established relationship with the researcher. The researcher has been responsible for planning and facilitating the professional learning experiences for the kindergarten teacher leadership cohort so over the 18-month time span they have had multiple contacts and conversations related to play practices in kindergarten classrooms. The participants are well aware of the researcher’s stance and personal history with play. The researcher is also a former kindergarten teacher in this district so has different longevity in relationships with different participants.

Limitations

The limitations of this study may include a lack of ability to generalize to other school districts due to the unique characteristics described in the three delimitations categories: (a) setting; (b) participants; and (c) researcher relationships. There may be a lack of shared characteristics specific to guided play practices in kindergarten and the
supports for teachers developing the practice. Conducting an exact replication of the study focused on guided play is not possible, but there is potential to replicate the study looking at the professional capacity building structures in place to support other district initiatives and program implementation.

**Rationale and Significance**

This constructivist grounded theory study will explore the professional capacity building structures that are in place for the kindergarten teachers who are currently implementing purposeful play practices in their kindergarten classrooms. Uncovering the factors that support successful implementation will provide insight into how to improve professional capacity building structures for kindergarten teachers on a broader scale.

The significance of this study lies in developing a vision for how to influence and support the implementation of guided play practices in kindergarten classrooms. Insights into the impact of school leadership, professional learning, and collaboration on impacting change and growth in classrooms is widely documented in research literature. This study looks in depth at these three professional capacity building structures and focuses on how different aspects impact implementation of guided play. The information has great relevance for districts looking to enhance these practices in their kindergarten classrooms in support of optimizing young children’s development and learning potential. It also has broader significance in the assumption that the structures in place that impact implementation of guided play could also impact the adoption of other pedagogy and/or the implementation of other practice.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The first section of this literature review will explore the benefits of play for young children. The concept of guided play will be defined, along with a discussion of how guided play can be utilized in the kindergarten classroom to ensure that instructional practices are both developmentally appropriate and aligned with standards. Research demonstrates that both of these are important for children to learn in ways that are most natural and beneficial, but still experience high expectations for rigor and academic growth.

Like all instructional pedagogies and practices, the effectiveness of implementation is enhanced when the educators themselves experience support, encouragement, and engagement. The second section of this literature review will explore three valuable structures for building educators’ professional capacity: leadership, professional learning, and collaboration. Research will be shared about how these structures elevate the implementation of quality play practices that lead to positive developmental and academic outcomes for young children.

Guided Play

Why is play important?

“Play is important for brain, cognitive, linguistic, physical, psychological, and social-emotional development and well-being” (Wood, 2014, p 48). Play is a human need throughout life and is especially critical during early childhood. A meta-analyses on what influences achievement in school-aged students showed that play programs in
classrooms accelerate children’s learning (Fisher, Frey, & Hattie, 2016). The stakes are high because “if children lack opportunities to experience such play, their long-term capacities related to metacognition, problem solving, and social cognition—as well as to academic areas such as literacy, mathematics, and science—may be diminished” (Gmitrova & Gmitrov, 2003, p 246).

Research has shown that symbolic play promotes a child’s intellectual development, as well as proficiency in literacy and math. Symbolic play helps children grow as thinkers, planners, and doers (McWilliams, Brailsford Vaughns, Novotny, & Kyle, 2014; Sarama & Clements, 2009). Symbolic play is a type of play where children use an object to represent something else. It involves opportunities for children to experiment with objects and social scenarios that they observe in the real world. Children are able to think about their previous understandings in new ways and develop more sophisticated ideas. In essence, symbolic play helps children make sense of their world and their learning. The cultural rules children learn through symbolic play provide a solid foundation for academic learning because it is through this that learning becomes concrete.

Pretending, language, and literacy are all modes of symbolic thought. Exploration during pretend play provides opportunities for children to practice creating symbols as they mentally transform objects within a play scenario. This develops children’s understanding that symbols have meaning, a critical foundation for long-term success in reading, writing, using numerals in math, or representing scientific ideas (Carlsson-Paige, Mclaughlin, & Almon, 2015; White, 2018).
Without symbolic play experiences, academic learning is more abstract, less meaningful, and more difficult to access (Worthington & Oers, 2016). For example, literacy and math development involve finding meaning in abstract symbols (letters, words, numbers, shapes, etc.). Children gain capacity to make sense of these symbols along a continuum. Engagement in symbolic play comes early on this continuum before the ability to recognize letters and decode words (Burts et al., 2016; Meisels, Jablon, Marsden, & Dichtelmiller, M.L., Dorfman, 1994).

Considering that current play experiences are limited in kindergarten, this research shows that the efforts made at schools across the nation to push academic learning earlier by eliminating dramatic play centers and experiences is counterproductive. Dramatic play centers are critical in kindergarten classrooms because they provide opportunities for children to engage in symbolic play and sociodramatic play, both types of play have very important benefits for young children’s learning and development. While symbolic play involves using an object to represent something else, this process can be played out during sociodramatic play where children act out imaginary situations, become different characters, and pretend they are in different places.

Young children learn better when their learning is connected and supported through regular engagement in sociodramatic play. “In sociodramatic play, children must work together to create the fantasy world that they are playing within. Several studies show the ways children negotiate multiple languages and cultures in their play, and how these support their language development” (Axelrod, 2014). In addition to opportunities
to build language, sociodramatic play also provides a context for children’s mathematical thinking, social development, and self-regulation (Clements & Sarama, 2014).

“The multidimensional nature of play corresponds with the multidimensional nature of early literacy development” (Liu, 2008, p 43). Children learn language and literacy best through active engagement in rich, authentic experiences and play provides an ideal context for this. A discussion of how to build a tower in the block center provides children with meaningful experience using language and developing mathematical concepts. Listening to a story on the CD player or writing a recipe in the kitchen center provide children with meaningful real-world literacy experiences that promote literacy development (Van Hoorn, Judith; Monighan Nourot, Patricia; Rodriguez Alward, Keith; Scales, 2014).

Children learn better when they value and initiate their own activities. It is critically important that children have frequent opportunities to make learning choices in kindergarten, combining hands-on learning with child-initiated play (Almon et al., 2011). “Researchers have found that student motivation in the classroom is fostered by three major considerations: (1) the nature of the task and its value to the student; (2) the nature of the learner and his or her expectations of success; and (3) the nature of the learning environment and the extent to which it emphasizes learning goals and provides support” (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018, p. 28). Children’s level of autonomy and interest in a learning activity is positively correlated with their level of motivation and engagement. Play provides a valuable context in which children’s autonomy and interests are encouraged and supported. Research demonstrates that emotional investment in
learning matters and this suggests that children’s opportunities to make their own decisions during positively impacts achievement (Dabrowski & Marshall, 2019).

In kindergarten classrooms across the nation, opportunities for child voice and choice were eliminated along with the play center areas. The new direct-instruction focus and controlled nature of the environment was built on the assumption that if children were given choices, they would choose low-level thinking tasks and waste precious time needed to reach academic standards and mastery of curriculum expectations.

Early childhood educators generally subscribe to the benefits of exploration and innovation for children ages birth through five, but once children enter the elementary years these experiences greatly reduced due to a common barrier; expectations and priorities focused on teacher-directed, prescriptive, close-ended learning experiences receive priority (Stipek, Franke, Clements, Farran, & Coburn, 2017). Due to fear and a lack of understanding of early childhood development and learning, the vast majority of time spent in kindergarten became focused on testing and test preparation, practices that would have in the past seemed irrelevant and even harmful (Miller & Almon, 2009). Opportunities for child choice and learning based upon personal interests in kindergarten were swept aside.

The reality is, “extensive experience of working with young children and their teachers confirms the supposition that all children are innately curious and eager to explore their environments and learn about a wide variety of causes and effects. In this sense, our early education pedagogical methods should support these basic dispositions and provide a wide range of contexts for young children to use them” (Katz, 2010, p. 6). Opportunities for exploration and innovation are instrumental in enhancing children’s
development and learning. Often characterized as constructive play, research demonstrates that this approach to learning supports intellectual, social, and emotional development, as well as imagination and creativity (CASEL, 2019; Drew, Christie, Johnson, Meckley, & Nell, 2008). Through frequent and sustained engagement in child-initiated exploration and innovation, children develop productive dispositions that include curiosity, imagination, inventiveness, risk taking, creativity, and persistence (Clements & Sarama, 2012).

Exploration and innovation with mathematical, scientific, and literacy concepts provides children opportunities to practice, deepen, and expand learning presented during direct instruction. It is during mathematical play that children’s thinking is mathematically active. This provides a heightened experience from which they can develop mathematical skills, concepts, reasoning, and strategies (Clements & Sarama, 2012; Vogel, 2013). “Math standards do not preclude teachers implementing playful, engaging activities. And they can help teachers determine the content and order of the activities they develop” (Stipek, 2017).

Play is important for logical-mathematical thinking. A study looking at the emergence of children’s mathematical understandings in spontaneous pretend play found that play and exploration experiences were instrumental because when children participated in these they became more mathematically active than they did during teacher-directed learning experiences (Vogel, 2013). When children were able to self-initiate and make choices throughout their learning they were more invested and engaged in mathematical tasks. The results demonstrated the value of including mathematical play experiences in classrooms throughout the primary elementary years.
As children develop their logical-mathematical thinking it is valuable for them to have authentic, real-world experiences with ample materials to explore these concepts through play. Play is important for problem solving. Children are naturally more persistent in their efforts while at play than during teacher-initiated activities. Like adults, when activities include personal relevance and interest children are more inspired to take initiative and think creatively for solutions. Play also provides opportunities for children to try new things and figure out how things work. “Play contributes to this ability by allowing children to ‘play through’ their ideas, in the same way that adults ‘talk through’ alternatives to problems they face and imagine consequences from varying perspectives” (Van Hoorn, Judith; Monighan Nourot, Patricia; Rodriguez Alward, Keith; Scales, 2014, p. 131).

“There is a growing body of evidence supporting the many connections between cognitive competence in children and high-quality play, especially pretend play” (Gmitrova & Gmitrov, 2003, p 246). A study on math learning strategies promoting student outcomes demonstrated that mathematical situations provided for students to explore during play promoted acquisition of math skills required in preschool and kindergarten. Children in play-based learning programs fulfilled the math requirements. “The analyses display the potential of the mathematical situations for using them in the mathematical education in kindergarten, pre-school and primary school” (Vogel, 2013, p 15).

Play promotes creative development. Creative thinking is instrumental in cognitive development. Although teacher-directed activities and scripted curriculum have their place and provide benefits for children’s learning, children’s creative development
is not supported in activities where children must follow specific step-by-step directions. When a child builds an elaborate tower in the blocks center or experiments with materials in the art center, she is able to plan, produce, and evaluate a design that is meaningful to her. “The creative process is seen as a sequence through which the creative person proceeds in clarifying a problem, working on it, and producing a solution that resolves the difficulty” (Edwards, 2009, p 58). Play provides an opportunity for children to initiate the processes that are engaging and inspirational to them. Providing children with the opportunity to explore is of utmost importance in the early childhood classroom.

Vygotsky proposed the idea that when challenged by their peers during play, children function above their normal level of ability. His theories provided great insight to the field understand that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition (1980). The experience of play is powerful. Play is intertwined with a person’s cognitive, social, language, and physical selves (Weissman, 2009). Learning is maximized when all areas of a child’s development are supported. This is because all of these areas of development are connected. They work together to promote learning and work best when accessed simultaneously.

Research conducted in various countries contradicted the move away from play-based learning for young children in the United States. In the 1970s, Germany experienced a similar push for more skill-based work in preschools. During this time, they conducted a study comparing student outcomes in 50 play-based classrooms with 50 early learning centers focused on skill-based work. The study showed that the children in the play-based classrooms excelled over the others in reading and math by the age of 10.
These children also had stronger expressive language skills, were better adjusted socially and emotionally, showed stronger creativity, and were more industrious in their studies (Schmerkotte, 1978). The results of the study moved German education officials to require all classrooms be play-based until children enter first grade at age 7. This requirement persists (Almon & Miller, 2011).

Studies in Finland and New Zealand also showed no long-term gains for children exposed to skill-based versus play-based learning (Suggate, 2009). Like Germany, children in these countries also begin more formal skill-based work at age 7 and the countries consistently produce higher student outcomes in academic areas. “The desire for a fast track to success, coupled with the push for tough standards and test-based accountability, has built a new superhighway without speed limits or guardrails—a dangerous place for children” (Almon et al., 2011, p 2).

Play is valuable "not just because play reduces stress and makes children more socially competent- which evidence suggests that it does. It matters also because play supposedly improves working memory and self-regulation; in other words, it makes kids sharper and better behaved. So ironically, by shortchanging them on play in favor of academics, we may actually be inhibiting their development" (Bartlett, 2011, p 3). Play is an integral component of a developmentally appropriate, high-quality learning environment. Research shows that higher classroom quality in early childhood learning environments is predictive of child cognitive and social outcomes, with children who experience higher quality doing much better than children in lower- quality early learning environments (Burchinal, Howes, & Kontos, 2002; Lamb, 1998) (Daugherty, Lindsay; Howes & Karoly, Lynn; Lara-Cinisomo, Sandraluz; Sidle Fuligni, 2009).
According to Almon and Miller (2009), "Too many schools place a double burden on young children. First, they heighten their stress by demanding that they master material beyond their developmental level. Then they deprive children of their chief means of dealing with that stress- creative play" (p 4).
What is guided play?

It is important to state that all types of play have value and support kindergartener’s learning and development. It is recommended that a daily classroom schedule for young children include time for free play where children are autonomous (freely initiating their own activities with ample time to explore their own interests independent from the influence of adults), but this type of play is not the focus of this study. “Defining play as a continuum might also allow us to better specify not only the types of play, but the outcomes that emerge from each genre. For example, free play, with no extrinsic goal, might prove optimal for social development whereas guided play, in which adults take supportive (rather than leading) roles in service of a learning goal is repeatedly demonstrated to be effective for more academic types of learning” (Zosh et al., 2018, p. 2).

This study is focused on guided play which involves opportunities for children to initiate their own activities with ample time to explore their own interests, but these experiences are not completely free and open-ended. They include connections to academic goals and focused interactions with adults. “In a healthy kindergarten, play does not mean ‘anything goes.’ It does not deteriorate into chaos. Nor is play so tightly structured by adults that children are denied the opportunity to learn through their own initiative and exploration. Kindergartners need a balance of child-initiated play in the presence of engaged teachers and more focused experiential learning guided by teachers” (Almon, Joan & Miller, 2009, p 4).

Guided play involves adults taking an active role in children’s play by providing mentorship and supporting children to focus on specific learning outcomes (Cavanaugh,
Children’s ability to reach specific academic goals and content standards, as well as make connections with curriculum depends on the support of an adult. This is why guided play in kindergarten classrooms is a great fit. It meets the kindergarten child’s need for the critical aspects of play: choice, intrinsic motivation, active engagement, spontaneity, and joy (Nell & Drew, 2020). At the same time, it also provides room for teachers to guide and support children to focus on learning goals in connection with curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

There are two forms of guided play that early childhood educators utilize in the classroom. The first occurs when a skilled educator observes child-initiated activities and provides scaffolded learning support by making comments, encouraging children to question, or extending on children’s interests (Weisberg et al., 2016). The educator acts as a model for how to get started using materials, acts as support when a child becomes frustrated or stuck, and acts to celebrate and praise children when they invent their own ways of exploring materials and developing higher level thinking skills (Vogel, 2013).

“When teachers encourage children to explore and think about what they are doing and talk and plan together, there is potential for skill development in a lot of areas… language, science, social competence, as well as positive dispositions toward learning and learning how to learn” (Drew, Christie, Johnson, Meckley, & Nell, 2008, p 40).

The second form of guided play involves explicit planning and design of play areas to highlight a learning goal while providing children with opportunities to initiate and explore (Weisberg et al., 2016). An example would be staging the dramatic play area
as a post office with materials for children to write letters to their friends and family, providing opportunities for children to develop concepts of print (an English language arts content standard). Organizing a rich play environment in this way and providing engaging, academic materials is critical to target content standards within children’s play experiences.

Young children learn best through their interactions with others coupled with hands-on exploration experiences. The way an educator stages the classroom determines the level of learning the play will support. An educator’s ability to ask thoughtful questions and engage in instructional discussions relies on the learning materials that are available with which to interact. “Teachers who are knowledgeable about the purposeful use of materials, the process of constructive play, and intentional strategies for interacting with children succeed in helping children develop essential concepts and skills in all content areas” (Drew, Christie, Johnson, Meckley, & Nell, 2008, p 42).

Angela Pyle’s work focused on play-based learning is well aligned with how guided play is being defined and utilized in this study. “Play-based learning has been described as a teaching approach involving playful, child-directed elements along with some degree of adult guidance and scaffolded learning objectives” (Pyle & Danniels, 2017, p. 276). Her work also helps us understand play along a continuum from more child directed to more teacher directed experiences. These are illustrated in Figure 1. Continuum of play-based learning as free play, inquiry play, collaboratively designed play, playful learning, and learning through games. Within this, guided play there are varying degrees of teacher involvement. For example, in inquiry play the child maintains the locus of control in their own exploration within a staged learning environment. The
teachers’ level of involvement is primarily in organizing materials and experiences that
the child will find engaging. In collaboratively designed play, there is more of a shared
locus of control because teachers guide the child by providing expected learning
outcomes, but the child still has an equal say in how to meet the expectations.

![Figure 2.2- Continuum of Play-Based Learning](Pyle & Danniels, 2017, p. 282)

Jeffrey Trawick-Smith’s work also provides insight about approaches to play
along a continuum: the trust-in-play approach, the facilitate-play approach, the enhance-
learning-outcomes-through-play approach (Trawick-Smith, 2012). These approaches are
based upon the assumptions that autonomous play is beneficial, not all children are able
to play, supporting play does not preclude academic learning, and approaches to play are
not incompatible if teachers are responsive. Like other play experts, this work highlights
the notion that all forms of play are valuable in children’s learning. During each play
interaction with a child, masterful teachers make decisions about the depth of their
involvement based upon what children are doing in that moment and what needs the child
has for support. “Sometimes children should be left alone in play, as trust-in-play
theorists advocate; other times interventions to enhance play itself are warranted, as
prescribed by facilitate-play advocates. At the right moments, interactions to address specific academic standards can be effective, reflecting an enhance-learning-outcomes-through-play approach” (Trawick-Smith, 2012, p. 272).

There are common misconceptions that facilitating a play-centered classroom means that children always work independently without the involvement of a teacher. Although there are many benefits to free play, this approach alone will not support student learning focused on targeted curricular goals and academic standards. Guided play provides the middle ground between teacher-directed instruction and child-centered exploration. It provides opportunities for developmentally appropriate and informed approaches to learning that connects a playful pedagogy to expectations for curriculum, instruction, and assessment (Weisberg et al., 2013).

**What are the benefits of guided play?**

Focusing on the elevation of quality and quantity of guided play practices in kindergarten would mean that classrooms would not need to be organized based solely upon teacher-directed, scripted instruction. With a guided play approach, teachers can be more flexible and organize their classrooms based upon research and evidence-based practices for young learners versus based upon fear of children not being exposed to the academic experiences needed to demonstrate achievement based upon required testing. Children can play AND learn academic content simultaneously when teachers act as thoughtful and responsive innovators. “Play serves a critical role in the development of long-term cognitive skills that will enable children to become ‘college and career ready’ in later years; research has demonstrated that children who experience more active, child-
initiated early learning experiences perform better in later school years” (Silverman, 2019, p. 16).

Vivian Gussey Paley is a world-renowned expert in play. In a 2003 interview, she discussed the role of an educator during play. “Their role is to try to make connections that help reveal the players’ intentions, especially when it seems as if the players may have lost touch with what those connections are. After all, the players are much younger than the teacher. They’re just learning to make these connections. The teacher has had many years’ experience in this and is there to give the children a head start” (Dombrink-Greere & Paley, 2011, p 91).

According to a qualitative study comparing teacher-directed and child-directed experiences, an educator’s role in classroom play is vital. “The types of interactions that teachers have with children can determine how well children learn and how effective teachers are at conveying given concepts or lessons” (Lara-Cinisomo, Sidle Fuligni, Daugherty, Howes, & Karoly, 2009). Effective interactions in guided play that promote children’s learning involve educators being supportive, establishing trust, encouraging individualization, being a role model, and demonstrating mutual respect.

Guided play supports children’s development of executive function which is critical in children’s capacity to be life-long learners and access academic content (Center on the Developing Child, 2015). A study showed that children engaged in thoughtfully planned and staged play environments with the support of responsive educators demonstrated higher levels of cognitive flexibility, self-control, and working memory than those participating in more direct-instruction. These components of executive function are consistently linked to increased academic achievement (Bartlett, 2011, p 6).
“Excellent teachers in early childhood programs are intentional in all they do with and for children. They do not assume that children's development will happen without support, encouragement, and scaffolding or without presenting appropriate challenges for the children (Gronlund, Gaye and Stewart, 2011, p 28).

The literature focused on learning through academic choice identifies a critical three phase process where children are able to plan, work, and reflect upon their learning (Denton, 2005). In the High Scope model, this effective approach to learning is known as “plan, do, and review” (Schweinhart et al., 2005). A critical component to the planning phase involves ensuring that children fully understand their learning goals and utilize these goals to inform their own decision-making.

When teachers engage in guided play practices, they can provide guidance by ensuring that learning goals are transparent for young children. This provides children with valuable information and guidance so that when they engage in decision making during play they can make decisions and plans in connection with their learning goals. Children are able to choose, be intrinsically motivated, engaged, spontaneous, and joyful while connecting with personal learning goals, classroom expectations, and curriculum content. Combining the power of these two proven learning approaches (play and goal focused learning) through masterful guided play practices effectively promotes children’s learning and development (Hattie, 2012; Nell & Drew, 2020).

**What does guided play look like in kindergarten?**

“Guided play lies midway between direct instruction and free play, presenting a learning goal, and scaffolding the environment while allowing children to maintain a
large degree of control over their learning. The evidence suggests that such approaches often outperform direct-instruction approaches in encouraging a variety of positive academic outcomes” (Weisberg et al., 2013). Guided play in the kindergarten classroom involves staging the environment so that children have frequent and varied opportunities to explore content-based and developmental learning through self-initiated experiences supported by responsive adults.

![Figure 2.3- The Kindergarten Continuum](Almon, Joan & Miller, 2009, p 5)

The Kindergarten Continuum image includes important information to guide instructional leadership for kindergarten. “The creation of a healthy balance described above has been blocked by current policies and government-imposed practices and programs, including No Child Left Behind and Reading First. These well-intentioned but fundamentally flawed mandates rely on testing and on didactic and scripted approaches—especially for teaching children from low-income backgrounds— in spite of the fact that these practices are not well supported by research evidence. Indeed, many of the current approaches to kindergarten education are based on unfounded assumptions and
preconceptions about what is best for children and schools” (Almon, Joan & Miller, 2009, p 5).

A responsive adult is one who knows each child well, knows the content well, knows where each child is on a developmental continuum, knows each child’s short and long term learning goals, ensures opportunities are culturally and personally relevant to each child, and provides just enough scaffolding support to maximize learning (Downey & Church, 2009; Hattie, 2012; Marzano Research, 2019; Tomlinson, 2014). Acting as a responsive adult during guided play is critical because young children’s development varies widely, each child has their own interests and learning style, children’s life experiences vary widely, and each child is raised in a social and cultural context that shapes them as a learner (Gronlund, 2016). Individualization is a critical component of effective guided play practices to ensure that all children have equitable access to what they need (Downey & Church, 2009; James & Iruka, 2018; Pacchiano, Klein, & Shigeyo Hawley, 2016).

Table 2.1- A Guided Play Checklist for Teachers (Masterson, 2019) demonstrates what a kindergarten teacher prioritizes to provide effective guided play experiences in the kindergarten classroom. When a teacher engages in self-reflection and is able to check these boxes, he or she can confirm engagement in quality guided play practices.
Table 2.1- A Guided Play Checklist for Teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do I know and understand each child well enough to respond meaningfully to individual abilities and needs?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do I set purposeful learning goals for materials and activities and know which areas of development and content skills will be supported?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do play themes, books, props, and other materials and learning opportunities support the language and cultural experiences of the children and their families?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do materials and conversations increase children’s attention and persistence?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do I see how the activity strengthens executive function skills and self-regulation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do I notice the way children’s skills change over time and update materials to ensure increasingly complex challenges to keep pace with their needs? Do I share with families why we do what we do in the classroom and sincerely seek their input?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do I observe carefully, noticing what works well and what needs to be adjusted to foster greater engagement? Do I provide feedback that offers information or vocabulary that helps children dig deeper in understanding?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do I use open-ended questioning to draw children into conversations and encourage their ideas and explanations?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do I listen to and notice children’s words, interactions with others, and emerging skills? Do I capture these through written notes, photographs, videos, and samples of children’s work? Do I share the excitement of what children are learning with their families?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do I introduce and model rich, descriptive vocabulary in a variety of ways during play, reading, and daily activities? Do I introduce props that invite children to understand the meaning of new words and act these out during play?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do I encourage flexibility, empathy, cooperation, collaboration, and problem-solving skills as children engage with their peers?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do I reflect with my coteachers on the effectiveness of playful learning and plan action steps for positive change?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do I talk with families about their goals for children, ask about the child’s home experiences, and invite contributions to play themes and materials?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Why is it necessary to build educators’ professional capacity to engage in guided play?

Because play practices have declined in kindergarten classrooms over the past decade, it is difficult for educators to find model of these practices in action or a mentor to learn from to build play expertise. K-12 systems are not currently supportive of play. The provided daily time allotments outlining scheduling expectations, scripted
curriculum adoptions, and teacher evaluation practices deter teachers from providing play experiences. A misconception about the benefits of play leads to pressure on kindergarten teachers to avoid playful learning and to promote children’s skill acquisition in less developmentally appropriate ways (Almon & Miller, 2011).

The influence of leadership, professional learning, and collaboration are essential to build educators’ capacity to effectively implement quality guided play practices. Leaders who have knowledge of early childhood pedagogy and practice work to inspire, guide, and support kindergarten teachers, as well as provide access to resources and materials to expand play in the classroom environment. Professional learning opportunities focused develop teachers understanding of guided play practices, strategies for implementation, and on ongoing cycles of improvement. Collaboration with other teachers who implement guided play practices provides access to a learning community that is supportive, empowering, and instructive. Each of these professional capacity building structures make an impact on teachers’ practice and children’s access to a joyful, rigorous, and developmentally appropriate classroom environment.

**Professional Capacity Building**

**Leadership**

During my son’s kindergarten year, I talked about my concerns with his school principal. I described the elements of quality that are critical in a developmentally appropriate kindergarten experience. She said to me, “we no longer have time for play in kindergarten.” It will ring in my ears forever. In that moment, it became clear to me that I was fighting an uphill battle in support of my son’s learning and development. School
leaders set the tone for what happens in the classroom. Leaders both guide and evaluate the teachers so they have great power in shaping children’s experiences. Without their understanding and support of guided play practices in kindergarten, it would be difficult for teachers to implement and sustain these practices with confidence and fidelity.

Elements of effective leadership in elementary school early childhood programs have emerged through research and evidence. Elements of leadership that set the stage for successful early learning include leaders’ knowledge in early childhood practices and pedagogies, ability to communicate a clear vision, capacity to lead for change, adaptive leadership techniques, building systems of support, and elevating teachers as leaders.

**Professional knowledge in early childhood.**

Implementation of guided play practices in kindergarten can be advanced by leaders who understand children’s development, why play is valuable in learning, and how to guide teachers in their play practices. Children’s development changes drastically during the elementary years. In order to effectively lead schools that are responsive to children’s learning needs as they grow, leaders must have an understanding of what quality looks like for young learners (Loewenberg, 2016). “Effective leadership requires familiarity, if not expertise, in many topics spanning the birth through age eight continuum” (Martella, Jost, & Oladiran, 2018).

In the years since the implementation of No Child Left Behind (U.S. Department of Education, 2005), the amount of time kindergarten children in the United States spend playing in their classrooms has decreased (Bassok et al., 2016). Pressure to achieve on high-stakes tests later in the elementary years has prompted principals and other school leaders to pressure teachers to step away from play practices toward more skill-based,
teacher-directed learning. Leaders’ attitudes and beliefs about play have played an impactful role in this phenomenon. School leaders have overlooked and misunderstood play’s potential to provide rigorous learning opportunities and a solid foundation for later school success. “Pre-K may be common now, but training for principals around best practices for pre-K teaching and learning still isn’t” (Bouffard, 2018, p 1).

A strong foundation in early childhood education practice and pedagogy provides leaders tools they need to effectively lead for quality guided play practices in kindergarten. A 2014 survey demonstrated a link between a leader’s depth of understanding of birth through grade 3 (including practices, pedagogies, and child development) with his or her ability to effectively guide early learning programs (NAESP, 2014). This survey confirmed that instructional leaders with depth and breadth of early care and education knowledge are instrumental in aligning standards, curriculum, instructional strategies, and assessment to ensure effective, connected, and continuous instruction for young children (Mead, 2011).

In the same NAESP survey, more than one-half of principals reported that they desire additional resources, practical knowledge, and professional learning opportunities to develop their capacity to lead PreK-3rd grade programs in elementary schools (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2014). This demonstrates that principals want to build their capacity as early learning leaders, but finding time to do so and access to professional development are barriers to bringing this desire to fruition.

Kindergarten teachers continue to experience increasing pressure to step away from play practices in favor of skill-based, teacher-directed learning (Keung, Yin, Tam, Chai, & Ng, 2019). A principal who was not exposed to early childhood coursework and
who taught older children before becoming a leader would be unlikely to possess fundamental knowledge to lead early childhood programs; however, a leader committed to his or her own professional development could build this capacity. Only 1 in 5 principals feel well-trained in early childhood (Bouffard, 2018), it is critical that they take action. A study in South Africa (Mestry, 2017) found that preparation and training in the areas of leadership and management coupled with ongoing engagement in professional learning elevated principals’ personal perceptions of their abilities to lead effectively. In a productive and effective school system, students are learners, teachers are learners, and leaders are learners.

**Clear vision.**

Effective leadership involves setting a clear vision that promotes common understanding about what and how young children learn (Goffin, 2013; NAESP, 2016). Research shows that schools with a clear vision, goal consensus, and task orientation receive higher ratings of quality (Pacchiano et al., 2016). To expand and enhance implementation of guided play practices in kindergarten, a clear vision for play provides the foundation from which focused priorities, goals, expectations, and procedures can emerge. It all starts with the vision. Ongoing success expanding children’s play opportunities and elevating children’s play experiences depends on the vision.

Guided play practices can be advanced when the vision for play is clear and clearly communicated among district leaders, curriculum supervisors, building administrators, instructional coaches, and teachers. “Purpose matters. It is the core of mission-driven work” (Goffin & Washington, 2007, p. 34). Implementing quality guided
play practices in kindergarten is a big leap for many school districts across the nation. The overwhelming amount of research supporting play’s value makes elevating play on behalf of young children mission-driven work. A clear vision for play provides a guiding light for educators. With the vision at the center of their work, they can focus on the purpose of their efforts and the goals they seek to achieve.

There are two essential considerations in an effective vision. The first is to ensure that the vision itself is based upon a deep understanding of quality pedagogy and practice. The second is to make sure that the vision is clearly articulated and understood by the people responsible for bringing the abstract concept of the vision to a concrete reality.

“Keeping the shared vision and goals present and alive in the daily work of organizations is critical” (O’Neil & Brinkerhoff, 2018, p. 54). Bringing a vision to life requires identified goals, clear expectations, and common understanding.

**Adaptive leadership.**

Accentuating quality early learning practices in kindergarten classrooms requires a paradigm shift in today’s elementary schools. In order to lead this change, school leaders must act as an instrument for that change. This requires systems thinking, adaptive leadership, focused innovation, the ability to collaborate with others, and to remain strong in the face of resistance to change (Fullan, 2002; Margolin, 2013; Martella et al., 2018; Pacchiano et al., 2016; Patterson, Green, Lambarth, Burton, & Reid, 2018).

Leaders can act as adaptive leaders, elevating guided play through responsiveness to the voices of teachers, the understanding of what is best for young children, and a willingness to let quality practices develop overtime. School leadership is complex work
that requires innovation, courage, responsiveness, and flexibility. To meet these challenges, highly effective school leaders function as adaptive leaders. Elevating guided play practices requires approaching change as a complex process versus isolated technical challenges that can be solved with authoritative expertise. Adaptive school leaders connect organizational change to the values of teachers, students, and families. They embrace diverse views and utilize collective knowledge to inform decision making and action.

“Given its distinctive character, adaptive leadership does not direct individuals to respond in specified ways. Consistent with dynamic views on leadership, its focus is less on leadership characteristics and on leadership conferred by a person’s position, and more on leadership as an activity, on mobilizing people to tackle difficult problems, and on creating the conditions for doing the adaptive work necessary to achieve progress” (Goffin & Washington, 2007, p. 50).

Adaptive leaders understand that change is a gradual process that can often be painful, thus requiring persistence and patience in the face of reluctance. This phenomenon rings true for moving from the current direct-instruction dominated kindergarten structure to a play-focused kindergarten structure. Leaders must exercise patience, ongoing reflection, and flexibility as critical functions with an understanding that for great progress to happen, there will be barriers and moments of fear that prompt one to turn back. Adaptive leaders are mindful of this reality while persevering towards the goal.

Adaptive leaders are innovators who encourage risk-taking and innovation in others. They are proactive planners, but are also willing to admit mistakes and change
course as needed (Allensworth et al., 2018; Bornfreund & Loewenberg, 2018; Division for Early Childhood, 2016; Martella et al., 2018; Squires, 2015). Because embracing play practices is a paradigm shift, leaders supporting kindergarten teachers to be innovators and risk-takers through an adaptive leadership approach is essential for success.

**Instructional leaders as agents of change.**

Leaders can be change agents by acting as instructional leaders who shift the current kindergarten reality to a new kindergarten reality with playful learning environments and engaging play experiences. “Because the long-term effect of early education depends on high-quality teaching, it is critical that elementary school principals have the capacity to boost P–3 teacher effectiveness” (Szekely, 2013). To do this, school leaders must not just embrace guided play as an optimum process for learning and provide playful teachers with encouragement. Leaders must take that to a higher level by providing guidance and coaching support as teachers develop capacity and refine their practice (Takanishi, 2016).

It is unfortunate that in the current educational climate, when administrators schedule observation visits in kindergarten classrooms they tend to visit during teacher directed group experiences, stating “I do not want to come when children are just playing.” To act as an instructional leader in support of guided play practices, it is critical that this trend be shifted. To validate and influence practices, observation and assessment of teachers must be conducted while children are at play. It is through this that leaders will be able to reinforce the research-based understanding that children learn best at play.
When the leaders themselves possess a strong foundational knowledge of early childhood education, they are equipped with tools to positively validate and influence guided play practices for their teachers. They can act as instructional leaders for play, fostering and supporting the evolution of these practices in classrooms (Loewenberg, 2016; Mead, 2011). A leader’s coaching efforts can provide guidance for teachers so that they are able to translate the evidence-based practices they believe in into action. “If we want to implement new ideas, we don’t always know how to prioritize and remember everything we read and learn. Enter coaches. Instructional coaches help teachers learn and implement strategies that teachers want to implement to help their students hit powerful engagement or achievement goals” (Knight, Hoffman, Harris, & Thomas, 2020, p. 1).

A school leader’s ability to act as an instructional leader in this way requires that they have developed their own professional knowledge in early childhood education (discussed in an earlier section of this literature review). A leader’s professional knowledge coupled with his or her capacity as an instructional leader are mutually reinforcing.

In order to maintain high-quality learning standards in classrooms, a school leader must be a keen observer and developer of teachers’ quality play practices. To do this, instructional leaders must get into classrooms, observe teaching, and provide teachers with descriptive feedback. According to a 2013 article, leaders who are effective are ones who prioritize engagement in powerful interactions that support learning with teachers so that those teachers will engage in these same types of interactions with children. Some important points the article advises leaders to consider are:
• What you decide to say and do matters. How you are models for teachers, how you want them to be with children.

• Only when we ‘quiet the static’ can we see teachers’ strengths and decide how best to support their learning.

• Find the strength in the teacher, document it, and show it so she can see it, own it, and use it with greater intention.

• Help teachers see that what they say and do matters to children.

• Keep the conversation and connection going between you and teachers and between teachers and their colleagues (April, Dombro, Jablon, & Stetson, 2013, pages 75-77).

Teacher leadership.

Leaders can elevate teachers as leaders to build their confidence, foster their commitment, and encourage them to share their voice for their students. School leadership in elementary schools is a key driver for quality programs for young children (Mead, 2011). Principals may be the most visible leader, but a variety of educators can assume impactful leadership roles at both district and school levels, including teacher leaders. “Sustainability depends on many leaders- thus, the qualities of leadership must be attainable by many, not just a few” (Fullan, 2002, p. 5).

A study looking at the relationship between school principals’ leadership behaviors and a teachers’ sense of self-efficacy found that “one of the most powerful predictors of teacher impact on students is the idea that what he does is important” (Mehdinezhad & Mansouri, 2016, p 1). This confirms that a teacher’s attitudes and
beliefs about his or her own impact are correlated to student learning. Teacher agency can be defined as their capacity to act purposefully and constructively as they direct their own professional growth and contribute to the growth of their colleagues (OBrien, 2016). It also supports the idea that a teacher’s agency to make choices about how students spend their time in the classroom and their feelings of competence to make these decisions hold great importance. When teachers view themselves as leaders and feel that they can engage in meaningful decision-making and planning children benefit. Teachers are more inspired when they have more control over what happens in their classrooms. “When teachers have more control over curriculum, teaching, and assessment, they’re more inspired to teach than when they are pressured to deliver prescribed programs” (Sahlberg, 2013, p. 34).

Shared leadership demands a paradigm shift in which different types of relationships exist between administrators and teachers with more balance in terms of influence and contribution. This shifted balance supports the spread of leadership responsibilities and engagement in collaborative decision-making processes. “The wisest leaders may do less leading as they create space around them for others to grow” (Cody, 2013, p. 68). Teacher leaders contribute to building common vision, purpose, and action to facilitate the effective running of a school. Elevating guided play practices in kindergarten requires that kindergarten teachers are provided a voice in decision-making (Diamond, Grob, & Reitzes, 2015; Niesche & Keddie, 2011; Ross & Berger, 2009; Tooley & Connally, 2016; Vangrieken, Meredith, Packer, & Kyndt, 2017).

“To create the space for collaborative leadership, we must have confidence in teachers. Principals must honor teachers’ ability to drive their own professional
development and choose the form of growth that will work for them. Processes like teacher inquiry, lesson study, critical friends, or the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards’ Take One professional learning model can be of great help in providing structure and protocols for the collaborative work. But teachers must have autonomy and choice in determining which process they will follow and how they will pursue their projects” (Cody, 2013, p. 71).

Teacher leadership emerges in a variety of forms both inside and outside the classroom. Kindergarten teachers can lead from the classroom by using their knowledge and judgment to implement play practices with their own students. They can lead by teaching well and acting as a model for other teachers in meeting the many demands placed upon them. Kindergarten teachers can lead by collaborating with students, families, and colleagues to create first-rate conditions for playful learning. They can lead through inquiry by asking questions, trusting their instincts, documenting what they observe, and making decisions about what action is needed. Kindergarten teachers can lead by developing partnerships beyond their classrooms and schools to learn from and with other leaders to implement guided play practices on a broad scale (Collay, 2013). “Teachers are often the only ones who can see both their students and a given problem clearly enough to imagine a solution” (Sacks, 2013, p. 21).

**Systems of support.**

Urie Bronfenbrenner conceptualized the ecology of human development as a series of systems surrounding a developing person. The interactions and relationships the developing person has with these various systems throughout a lifespan have great impact on who they become (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). This theory of psychology can be utilized
to understand how the various levels in a school system influence a teacher, including his or her implementation of guided play practices. A teacher’s capacity to develop quality in practice is influenced by the systems that surround him or her at the school, district, community, state levels, and national levels and how these work to provide protective or risk factors. See Table 2.2- Ecology of a Teacher for description.

**Table 2.2- Ecology of a Teacher**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Self- the Teacher</strong></th>
<th><strong>Risk:</strong> lack of professional knowledge about play, lack of experience with play</th>
<th><strong>Protective:</strong> interested, positive play perspective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Microsystem- the school building</strong></td>
<td><strong>Risk:</strong> lack of available resources and materials, training and expectations that contradict playful learning</td>
<td><strong>Protective:</strong> principal positive attitude towards play, positive collaborative relationships with colleagues, time for professional learning, engagement with instructional leaders/coaches, supportive and engaged paraprofessionals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mesosystem- the school district</strong></td>
<td><strong>Risk:</strong> Conflicting messages about play and direct instruction, limited time allotments for play, lack of district focus on play</td>
<td><strong>Protective:</strong> District leadership promoting and encouraging play, clear expectations, play guides, articulation of play connections to curriculum, instruction, and assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Exosystem- state and federal board of education</strong></td>
<td><strong>Risk:</strong> Government mandated classroom and curriculum expectations</td>
<td><strong>Protective:</strong> Developmentally informed state standards, clear expectations for playful learning, policies in place that protect time for playful learning in kindergarten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Macrosystem- values and perspectives</strong></td>
<td><strong>Risk:</strong> misperceptions about the benefits of play</td>
<td><strong>Protective:</strong> positive attitudes about playful learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from (Metz, Klassen, & McMillan, 2007, p. 412)
School improvement research suggests that support across systems is essential. Effective implementation of quality practices relies upon the attention, focused work, and leadership of people at all levels of school systems, including district administrators, curriculum supervisors, school principals, instructional coaches, and teachers (Sebring, Allensworth, Bryk, Easton, & Luppescu, 2006; Vangrieken et al., 2017). The connections and shared understanding between educators at all levels promote success in actualizing a shared vision, aligning priorities, and eliminating contradictions across systems (Mead, 2011; NAESP, 2014). In building systems of support, school leaders are able to provide the conditions needed for the implementation of quality practices with success.

**Professional Learning**

During my son’s kindergarten year, I engaged in many conversations with his teacher about play practices. I sought to explain why they were important and what they looked like. To my dismay, she did not connect with these concepts. During his second semester, she began working on a master’s degree in early childhood education as part of a cohort sponsored by the school district. She pulled me aside one day in the spring to tell me that so many of the things I said to her were learning topics during her introduction to early childhood course. She said, “this is starting to make sense.” I continued to feel frustrated for my son (it was too little, too late), but I was hopeful that her engagement in the master’s degree program might provide her with professional learning opportunities that would spark changes in her classroom to benefit her future students.
Engagement in shared learning.

A positive professional learning climate creates the foundation for effective professional learning. Research shows that an effective learning climate is established when participants have trusting relationships with one another, show respect for each other’s viewpoints, and demonstrate openness to new ideas (Tooley & Connally, 2016). A positive learning climate is one in which educators believe that working together is the best way to achieve a collective purpose (NAESP, 2014). A learning culture based on relational trust develops collective professional capital in support of individual and group development. (Brewster & Railsback, 2003; Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017; Gerdes & Jefferson, 2015; National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2014; Tooley & Connally, 2016).

Schools are too frequently structured in ways that prevent teachers from working closely together (Brewster & Railsback, 2003) in an effective learning culture. Actualizing a professional learning environment that maximizes opportunities for shared learning relies on the extent to which educators can utilize essential skills and dispositions.
Table 2.3 - Essential Skills and Dispositions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Essential Skills</th>
<th>Essential Dispositions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Listen to self and others</td>
<td>• Openness to change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Critical and reflective</td>
<td>• Truthfulness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Flexible problem solvers and decision</td>
<td>• Self-accountability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>makers</td>
<td>• Self-awareness and awareness of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Communicative abilities</td>
<td>• Collaborative attitude and intention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Collaborative capacities</td>
<td>• Responsibility or the inclination to respond to others in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Negotiation</td>
<td>appropriate ways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Persistence</td>
<td>• Appreciation of oneself as a social creature who thrives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>through connections with others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Appreciation of and inclination toward involvement with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>social justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Inclination to serve others and participate in acts of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>good will</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Cohen et al., 2009; Joyce & Showers, 2002; Stewart, 2018; Zaslow, 2009)

Adult learning is maximized when six principles are followed: adults need to 1) know the reason for learning something; 2) be responsible for and involved in their own learning; 3) connect learning to personal experience; 4) learn what is personally relevant; 5) be problem-centered rather than content-oriented; and 6) be supported by internal versus external motivators (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Dodman, Zuidema, & Kleiman, 2018; Learning Forward, 2011a; Sawyer & Ramirez Stukey, 2019). These principles are all represented through engagement in ongoing cycles of job-embedded professional learning. “Job-embedded professional development is defined as teacher learning that is grounded in day-to-day practice and designed to enhance teachers’ content-specific instructional practices with the intent of improving student learning” (NAESP, 2014).

“The goal of the professional learning community is to foster professional learning in a setting in which the practitioner’s experience and expertise are utilized, the
contributions of the learner are valued, and opportunities for reflection are many” (Gerdes & Jefferson, 2015). This is an important perspective on the complexities in developing effective professional learning for kindergarten teachers. It accentuates the importance of focusing on building upon teachers’ prior knowledge, valuing their contributions and experiences, and providing time for teachers’ to think and talk with one another about their learning. When play is frowned upon in kindergarten classrooms, it is especially critical that teachers’ be supported to bring out what they already know about play, what they have already seen or done, and to think deeply about how they have seen play impact children’s learning and development.

A learning cycle involves opportunities to develop new knowledge and engage in metacognitive reflection. Quality professional learning for kindergarten teachers to elevate guided play practices involves engagement in cycles of continuous improvement by engaging in inquiry, action research, data analysis, planning, implementation, reflection, and evaluation (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Learning Forward, 2011c; Lieberman, Cook, & Jackson, 2018; Pacchiano et al., 2016).

**Professional Learning Content Supporting Guided Play.**

To implement purposeful play practices more effectively and efficiently on a broad scale, research studies demonstrate that perceptions and attitudes among early childhood teachers are important. Professional learning opportunities play a critical role in supporting teachers to develop understanding of how play impacts child outcomes so that teachers who prefer skill based practices and teacher directed learning are able to see evidence that play supports learning in meaningful ways. For example, a professional
learning movement known as P.L.A.Y. pedagogy is led by teachers of preschool through third grade teachers working to elevate the role of play in classrooms. Part of this work focuses on the need to raise the professionalization of play and start a movement among teachers to elevate the amount of time students have access to child-initiated experiences. A paper written by Riek (2015) suggests that play practices must first be embraced, practiced, and advocated for by teachers so that conclusive and supportive data can be collected to persuade school leaders of the value.

In addition to shifting attitudes and beliefs, professional learning also plays a critical role in supporting teachers to bring their positive beliefs about play to action in the classroom. Playful classrooms include rich materials, an engaging environment, and intentional interactions from educators in support of children’s development and academic learning. While an educator might have taken the first step to believing this is valuable, the next step for professional learning content involves how to effectively bring these to life in the classroom. A study looking at the experiences of children in prekindergarten through second grade classrooms found that “the two most frequently viewed student activity types were listening/watching (38.8 %) and written assignment (27.3 %), with the 450 students observed having participated in these behaviors 43 % of the observation time” (Alford, Rollins, Padrón, & Waxman, 2016, p 6). Even teachers whose attitudes and beliefs align with the implementation of play practices struggle to develop the balance between teacher-directed and child-initiated experiences.

This highlights the need for ongoing cycles of play focused professional learning for teachers. Experiences that support teachers to develop their play practices include opportunities for the educators themselves to engage in hands-on constructive play with
materials. Play experiences for adults help educators deepen and extend their understanding of play. They lead teachers to reflect upon how to organize the classroom environment and on how to interact with children during play to best support learning (Drew et al., 2008; Nell, Marcia L.; Drew, 2013).

Because of the importance of teacher to child interactions, professional learning opportunities that support educators to interact with children in meaningful ways can support the success of a play-based classroom. “Every interaction is an opportunity to nudge forward a child’s development of learning” (Dombro, Jablon, & Stetson, 2011, p 14). For children to engage in high-levels of thinking and develop competency in academic content areas during guided play, professional learning experiences for teachers must include more than the common elementary school focused professional development around literacy and mathematics. Kindergarten teachers benefit from focused learning and practice on how to ask good questions, engage children in instructional conversations, and provide descriptive feedback necessary to take learning to the next level.

**Collaboration**

I once had a conversation with my son’s kindergarten teacher questioning a developmentally inappropriate expectation and practice she was utilizing to manage student behavior. On the first day of school, he was talking in the drinking fountain line. She told him to be quiet in the hall and he did not comply right away. He was much more focused on making friends in his new class than on a rule about quiet halls, a construct of which he was previously unaware. At the end of the day, he (along with a few other
students) was not allowed to go to a second recess because he did not follow directions for the full day. She directed him to put his head down on the table and wait for the kids who followed the rules to return. This prompted him to cry for weeks, not understanding why his teacher didn’t like him. When I confronted her about this, she told me that she didn’t like it and this was not an expectation at her former school, but this is how the kindergarten team at this school teaches children to follow the rules and expectations. This story highlights the power of collaboration. For better or worse, educators have a tendency to band together. Because of this nature, collaboration has great potential to elevate or hinder guided play practices.

**Collaboration for Collective Efficacy.**

Collaboration involves “co-laboring to become responsible and accountable for our own work while supporting the work of other collaborators” (Knight, Hattie, & Fullan, 2016, p. 4). It is not enough to simply have collegial and trusting relationships with colleagues. Collaboration involves shared purpose, vision, goals, and collective action among a group of people functioning as a team. Each member of the team has a sense that his or her ideas matter and that working together is the most effective way to success. There are five essential skills to engagement in true collaboration. These include collaborative intention, truthfulness, self-accountability, self-awareness and awareness of others, and problem-solving and negotiation skills (Stewart, 2018, p. 93).

Research suggests that effective collaboration involves shared purpose, vision, goals, and collective action among a group of people from similar and diverse roles functioning as a team. Each member of the team must have a sense that his or her ideas
matter and that working together is the most effective way to success (Stewart, 2018, p. 93).

Collective efficacy among teachers is one of the top factors that influences student achievement (Donohoo, Hattie, & Eells, 2018). Research suggests that collaborative teams are essential to improve services, achieve better child outcomes, and eliminate disparities in opportunities and achievement. When working together within the school and beyond, educators can better problem solve, share ideas, provide and receive emotional support, and gain confidence during the challenging work of developing new practices (New, Ritchie, & Boone, 2009; Noguera & Noguera, 2018; Walker & Riordan, 2010). A school systems’ investment in time and support for collaboration builds professional capital and is highly predictive of student achievement (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2013).

“The way teachers work together to develop and continuously improve curriculum and instruction, emotionally supportive learning environments, and engagement of families is far more important and predictive of achievement than any individual teacher or school quality characteristic” (Pacchiano et al., 2016, p. 47). The paradigm shift required to elevate quality guided play practices in kindergarten classrooms relies on kindergarten teachers having consistent involvement in collaborative, goal-directed teams with shared values. With their colleagues, teachers can problem solve, share ideas, provide and receive emotional support, and gain confidence during the challenging work of practice change. This is often referred to as collective capacity and involves the way people work together in schools to improve teaching and learning (Noguera & Noguera, 2018; Walker & Riordan, 2010).
Research has clearly established collective efficacy as powerful and predictive in advancing children’s developmental and academic outcomes (Donohoo et al., 2018; Hattie & Zierer, 2017). A meta-analysis that demonstrated the effectiveness of play programs also demonstrated the value of collaboration. “John Hattie positioned collective efficacy at the top of the list of factors that influence student achievement (Hattie, 2016). According to his Visible Learning research, based on a synthesis of more than 1,500 meta-analyses, collective teacher efficacy is greater than three times more powerful and predictive of student achievement than socioeconomic status. It is more than double the effect of prior achievement and more than triple the effect of home environment and parental involvement. It is also greater than three times more predictive of student achievement than student motivation and concentration, persistence, and engagement” (Donohoo et al., 2018, p. 41).

Summary

A teacher’s experiences with leadership, professional learning, and collaboration make a huge impact on his or her guided play practices. These professional capacity building structures provide expectations, supports needed for implementation (materials, staffing of paraprofessionals, guidance on curriculum connections, etc.), knowledge about play practice and pedagogy, and connections with colleagues to maximize success. These opportunities make an impact on teachers’ practices and children’s access to a joyful, rigorous, and developmentally appropriate classroom environment. Leadership, professional learning, and collaboration are essential for expanding time for play in kindergarten and elevating the quality of children’s learning through play experiences.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Research Tradition

The researcher’s philosophical stance involves a situationalist orientation, the notion that it is appropriate to apply different philosophies to different situations and contexts. Because the nature of this study involves focusing upon a group of participants who have been engaged explicitly in socially constructing knowledge and building collective professional capacity through interrelated experiences (some of which have included engagement with the researcher herself), it is prudent to approach the data collection and analysis through a social constructionism paradigm (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013).

The researcher’s ontological assumption that reality is socially constructed lies at the core of selecting this approach. The research questions will be answered by seeking to understand the perspectives of the participants through reflective questions and conversation. The knowledge that will be discovered is subjective in nature as it is based upon uncovering the varied experiences participants have had with leadership, professional learning, and collaboration to build their professional capacity. The researcher’s epistemological assumption is that this knowledge is constructed through dialogue and negotiation. The information unpacked is dependent upon the individual lens from which each participant looks at their own experiences, the collective lens that has been established through shared learning and action, and the thinking and reflection generated through interactions with the researcher. “Constructionists believe that the researcher cannot maintain a detached or objective position, and they believe that both the researcher and the subject should actively collaborate in the meaning-making process.
Thus, researchers and participants are co-constructors of knowledge rather than conveyors and receivers of it” (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013, p. 62).

The phenomenon investigated in this social constructionism research paradigm are the structures of leadership, professional learning, and collaboration. The research approach utilized is grounded theory, “a research approach that focuses on interaction, action and processes. It has the overt purpose of generating theory from empirical data by use of inductive analysis called constant comparison of data” (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013, p. 183). The researcher acts as an investigator when collecting and analyzing data to derive meaning. Through the grounded theory approach, a theory emerges that is grounded in the data (Merriam, 2009).

Participants will be interviewed individually. The researcher will utilize the analytic strategy of constant comparison to develop themes and generate a theory based upon the perspectives shared. The researcher will look for patterns in themes or concepts collected in the interviews to develop and deepen understanding about how leadership, professional learning, and collaboration structures influence kindergarten teachers’ implementation of guided play practices. A theory will be developed from the varied experiences reported by the participants to explain the phenomenon under investigation, how leadership, professional learning, and collaboration influence guided play in kindergarten classrooms. A hypothesis will be generated directly from the data (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013).
Researcher Characteristics and Reflexivity

Before exploring the participants’ experiences, it will be important for the researcher to explore her own experiences and opinions in regards to guided play, leadership, professional learning, and collaboration. Attention to this will bring to light critical areas of consideration in the study, but also provide ongoing opportunities for reflection to minimize bias. A researcher must be aware of her own prejudices, viewpoints, and assumptions so that these do not unintentionally invade the interview questions, conversations with the participants, analysis of the data, discussion of the findings, or recommendations (Merriam, 2009). Exploring the researcher’s personal stance, positionality, and reflexivity is important in a qualitative study. It supports the process of considering the influence these factors might have on the study and provides attention to the explicit setting of boundaries so that the participants’ perspectives rise to the surface.

The researcher must set parameters so that when conducting interviews, the perspectives of the participants are brought forward and unobstructed by the researcher’s own views about play, leadership, professional learning, and collaboration. The researcher must also engage in critical reflection throughout the interview process and while analyzing the qualitative data collected to ensure that the data and the analysis reflects the perspectives of the participants versus supporting what she believes or hopes to be true.

The researcher has spent twenty plus years as a passionate advocate for play practices in early childhood classrooms, with a specific focus on how guided play practices in kindergarten classrooms decreased during that time span. The researcher
emerged as a leader in play through a reputation as an effective teacher in a playful classroom and as an instructional coach supporting other teachers’ development of their own effective play practices. This passion for play and advocacy for play practices must be considered due to their potential influence on the research.

This researcher’s position is that elevating the level of quality and increasing the amount of time children experience guided play practices in the kindergarten classroom are critical. The longevity of the researcher’s play advocacy and the fact that she remained true to providing guided play practices in her classroom in spite of pressures to eliminate them differs from the study participants with less experience and/or passion for implementing or advocating for guided play practices.

Another consideration involves the researcher’s current work actively building the capacity of early childhood education professionals. As an instructional coach, educational facilitator, and now program specialist, the researcher’s daily tasks involve supporting and guiding educators as they build their professional capacity to implement research and evidence-based early childhood practices. Bias toward specific coaching and leadership approaches, professional learning practices, and collaboration structures for educators could emerge due to focus on these aspects in her job and her own preferential approaches. The researcher’s engagement in reflection about how her personal views and experiences could potentially influence the findings must be ongoing throughout the process of the study.
Research Setting and Context

The setting of this grounded theory study is in an urban school district in the Midwest section of the United States with over 50 elementary schools. The student population is from a large variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds with more than 100 different languages spoken. Kindergarten classrooms in this district are full day programs staffed by a certified teacher and a full time paraprofessional. Requirements include curriculum resources and time allotments for math, language arts, social studies, and science, as well as time with specialists for physical education, art, vocal music, and library.

The teachers represent each geographic area in the district’s attendance area, as well as kindergarten students from a variety of socioeconomic, cultural, linguistic, and racial backgrounds. Teachers in this group have demonstrated commitment to the development of purposeful play practices in their classrooms but are at varying stages of implementation. Teachers range in years of total experience from 5 years to 25 years.

Research Sample and Data Sources

The participants in this grounded theory study share common experiences with leadership, professional learning, and collaboration. They have been working together over the last two years both formally and informally around the development of play practices in their classrooms. They met quarterly over an eighteen-month period to engage in professional learning and co-planning with the support and facilitation of the researcher herself. The participants continue to engage with one another at district meetings, trainings, and informal meetings, as well as through communication via social
media and email. Their individual understandings of play practices, as well as their experiences with leadership, professional learning, and collaboration have been shared both directly through engagement in the same activities and indirectly through discussion of each other’s experiences independent of the group. Their professional capacity to engage in play practices with their students continues to be socially constructed and collectively supported.

The participants will include nine kindergarten teachers selected as participants and leaders in the district project aimed at expanding play practices in kindergarten. This project has been developed by district administration and kindergarten teachers. Teachers in this group have demonstrated commitment to the development of purposeful play practices in their classrooms as defined by their district, but are all at varying stages in implementation. Teachers range in total years of teaching experience from 5 years to 25 years. The schools that they teach in represent each geographic area in the district’s attendance area, as well as kindergarten students from a variety of socioeconomic and racial backgrounds.

Data Collection Instruments

The Curriculum Instruction and Support department of the district provides a list of Kindergarten “Look Fors” as a guide for teachers and leaders to understand expectations for kindergarten classrooms. The “Look-Fors” include a section for high-quality purposeful play (see below). These were utilized as the outline to create the “High-Quality Purposeful Play Self-Assessment” (Appendix 1) tool. The headings and
subjects for the majority of the rubrics are taken directly from the school district’s “Look Fors” and are shown in Table 3.2- District Kindergarten “Look Fors.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3.2- District Kindergarten “Look Fors”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>❖ Specific time is designated daily for high quality purposeful play. This can also occur during instructional blocks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❖ Student choice occurs daily. <em>Outside play occurs daily (weather permitting).</em> This time provides the opportunity for a balance between interacting and engaging with students during play and providing small group instruction and intervention.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❖ Play is tied to big ideas and essential questions and are changed regularly. Play is supported with intentionality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❖ Play provides extensive opportunities for children to represent and extend their thinking and learning through multiple modalities (e.g., construction, drawing, writing, painting, movement, dance, drama).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❖ Suggested play centers include the following:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Dramatic play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Blocks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Discovery (Science and Social Studies)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Math</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Library</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❖ Play centers integrate multiple objectives, standards, and content areas naturally to support learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❖ Literacy and math should be integrated into all areas of play.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To ensure that the tool was rooted in the literature informing quality purposeful play practices, the *Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale* (ECERS) (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 2015) was utilized as a guide to inform the content. To ensure that the rubrics were clear and concise, *The Framework for Teaching Evaluation Instrument, 2013 Instructionally Focused Edition* was utilized to inform the structure and language (Danielson, 2013).

The next phase of data collection will include individual teacher interviews. An important tool for the interview process is the interviewer herself. A productive interview
relies upon the interviewer’s capacity to be respectful, non-judgmental, non-threatening, and a quality listener. Through reflection of my own capacity to do this with success, I have determined that my skill, training, and experience as an instructional coach will provide me with the necessary capacity to conduct productive research interviews. *Better Conversations* (Knight, 2016) supports professionals to be better communicators by having empathy, finding common ground, and building trust. Through training and practice in Jim Knight’s coaching approach, I have developed capacity to listen for understanding and to ask purposeful questions to guide an interviewee’s reflection without dominating the conversation myself. Because of this, I feel confident in my ability to conduct productive interviews that will bring out important insights about teachers’ perceptions of their experiences with professional capacity building structures. Questions for the interview will be designed based upon the recommendations of Sharan B. Merriam (2009). The proposed interview guide is as follows…

1. I understand that you are developing the implementation of purposeful play. Tell me about what play looks like in your classroom.
2. What motivated you to develop purposeful play practices?
3. Tell me what has helped you do this.
4. Where do you find information about purposeful play practices?
5. Tell me about a time when something you learned had a positive impact on your purposeful play practices.
6. What has changed in your classroom because of your learning?
7. Who do you talk to about your purposeful play practices?
8. Tell me about your current interactions with colleagues around purposeful play.
9. Tell me about what you do to keep track of your progress with purposeful play.
10. What other things do you do to manage purposeful play in your classroom?
11. What kinds of barriers do you experience when implementing purposeful play?
12. What else would you like to share about your journey in the implementation of purposeful play?

**Data Collection Procedures**

Three distinct categories of data will be collected for triangulation and synthesis (illustrated in the visual representation): perceptions, validation, and documentation. Perception data points include each participants’ selected stage on the High-Quality Purposeful Play Self-Assessment (Appendix 1), interview, and answers to follow-up questions based upon commonly selected codes. Validation data points include each participant’s member checking data. The documentation data points include a review of related school district documents. Data points are illustrated in Figure 3.1- Triangulation of Data.

![Figure 3.1- Triangulation of Data](image-url)
To determine each teacher’s perceived level of proficiency, the first phase of examination will involve completion of the “High-Quality Purposeful Play Self-Assessment” (Appendix 1) designed for teachers to rate themselves in a variety of areas relevant to purposeful play practices to determine an overall developmental stage and to guide their reflection around areas of strength and potential growth. Upon completion of the self-assessment, teachers will determine and report which developmental stage they selected most frequently. This data point will be used qualitatively to support the teacher’s reflection during the interview process.

The self-assessment discussion in the interview is a critical element. It involves each teacher’s perception of her stage of development with purposeful play and her explanations of why a specific stage was selected. Participants will describe how their play changed utilizing the descriptors in the self-assessment. This will provide the researcher with insight as to whether play in classrooms has changed over time because of the school district’s, building leaders’, and teachers’ personal experiences with the Transforming Kindergarten project. This is critical information because if the project has not influenced changes in play practices, the research question cannot be answered. To determine what influences change, change must be present and documented.

The second phase will include individual interviews examining teachers’ perceptions of their journey with the implementation of play practices and how these were influenced by their experiences with leadership, professional learning, and collaboration. Questions are designed to provide insight as to how these influencers have guided, supported, encouraged, or provided confidence in their ability to promote learning through play in their kindergarten classrooms.
The third phase of data collection will involve member checking, which is the method of “returning an interview or analyzed data to a participant” (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016, p. 1802). Because of the researcher’s reflexivity (based upon pre-established professional relationships with the participants and personal passion for and experience with the topic), this is a critical step. Validating the findings from the interviews will verify that the story told is that of the participant, eliminating a level of potential bias of the researcher. Each participant will be provided an interview summary consisting of analyzed synthesized data. Each participant will be prompted to provide feedback and to check that the summary descriptions reflect her thoughts and opinions. The researcher will also take this opportunity to ask follow-up questions to deepen and/or expand upon the thoughts of the participants to be utilized as additional data points.

The fourth stage of data collection will involve collecting documents disseminated by the districts, including information about the Transforming Kindergarten project and other documents intended to guide quality instructional practices.

**Data Analysis Procedures**

The analytic strategy for this grounded theory study involves constant comparison to develop themes and generate a theory. This study’s phenomenon involves which capacity building structures (leadership, professional learning, and collaboration) guide kindergarten teachers to implement purposeful play practices. There will be concurrent data collection and analysis of the interview transcriptions. Codes will arise during each transcription analysis. Patterns will emerge throughout the interview process.
The qualitative analysis will begin with initial coding by focusing on one phrase of the transcription at a time. For each phrase, the researcher will ask the question, “what is this about?” In this way, the codes will arise from the interview and not be predetermined (Saldana, 2013). With each consecutive participant’s transcription analysis, repeating patterns will arise and the grounded theory’s themes will emerge.

After coding each participant’s interview transcription, the researcher will select the most common themes and utilize them to create a graphic organizer aimed at sorting the thematic data. This stage of coding in grounded theory is known as axial coding (Saldana, 2013). The researcher will take the initial codes and group them in related categories. Organizing each individual participant’s transcription in this way will deepen the researcher’s understanding of the individual teacher’s perspectives about what influences her purposeful play practices. This process will lead to the creation of analyzed synthesized data in the form of individual teacher summary documents.

The summary documents, along with follow up questions will be provided to each participant as part of the next stage of data collection and analysis, known as the member checking process. The feedback and answers will provide confirmation and contradiction about the researcher’s interpretation, while also providing additional data points for analysis and deeper understanding of the participant’s perspectives. After collecting each individual member checking document, the researcher will merge the individual participant’s data summaries to create and analyze a collective data summary.

The researcher will next review the document information created and provided to school buildings to inform district expectations for instructional practices. The document analysis will involve “a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents,”
District created and disseminated documents developed for teachers and administrators require critical examination because they reflect the values and ideologies of the school district (Saldana, 2013). It is important to include document data in the analysis for this study because the contrary and affirming messages in documents work to influence the success of the project’s goals and the influences on the teachers. The researcher will code the document data utilizing the axial codes that arose in the interview transcription analysis by linking text information to the collective summary document.

**Summary**

Constructionism is a theory that emphasizes the active role learners play in the development of their own understanding and learning (Morrison, 2018). The study participants have engaged independently in the development of their guided play practices through their work in different schools, different years of teaching experience, and different educational backgrounds. They have had many independent experiences with leadership, professional learning, and collaboration to reflect upon. During the past two years their paths have collided, providing them opportunities for social construction of their guided play practices through shared learning experiences, collegial conversations, and common district level leadership. This social construction has also involved frequent interactions between the teachers and the researcher herself. The nature of these independent and shared constructivist learning experiences make the selection of a constructivist grounded theory study a perfect fit. The richness of the constructivist context already in motion provides an optimum condition for research momentum.
Through the grounded theory approach, the researcher will be able to weave together the professional capacity building experiences that have influenced the teachers’ guided play practices through concurrent data collection and analysis. Patterns in the teachers’ perspectives will emerge through the ongoing process of interviews and examination leading the researcher to gain understanding of the teachers’ reasons, opinions, and motivations. These insights will uncover trends and develop understanding of how to effectively influence teachers in ways that promote the implementation of quality practices.
Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

This chapter will illustrate the perspectives of the participants as related to the central research question, what professional capacity building structures influence kindergarten teachers’ implementation of guided play practices? The participants’ perspectives that emerge from the data will be related to the literature reviewed in chapter 2 about guided play, leadership, professional learning, and collaboration.

The qualitative data collected from the High-Quality Purposeful Play Self-Assessment involved the participants’ self-determined stage of guided play in their kindergarten classrooms. The assessment also functioned as a tool to prompt the participants’ reflection and deepen the interview conversation about their current play practices, their journey overtime with guided play, and their perceptions about how play in their classrooms was influenced by their experiences with leadership, professional learning, and collaboration. In this sense, the participants’ independent completion of the self-assessment worked to raise the quality of the data collected during the interview with the researcher.

Description of the Sample

A critically defining characteristic of the research sample is that each teacher included has been selected to be a part of a play leadership group aimed at advancing their district’s Transforming Kindergarten project. The criteria for selection as a teacher leader include having a history of quality teaching practices, a passion for continuous professional learning, and a commitment to the time and effort required of a teacher
leader. All of the teachers in the sample work for the same school district, a district which has committed time, resources, direction, and encouragement toward the elevation of play practices in kindergarten across levels of the school system (district administrators, building principals, teachers, and paraprofessionals). Each teacher is supervised by a building principal that is supportive of children’s learning through play in kindergarten and trusting of the teacher to engage in instructional decision-making.

All of the teachers have demonstrated growth in their play practices overtime, providing evidence of their collective capacity for continuous professional development and learning. All of the teachers are committed to elevating play practices in their classrooms and all report proficiency as a playful teacher based upon the High-Quality Purposeful Play-Self Assessment designed as a part of this study. None of the teachers are currently in the beginning or advanced stages based upon this assessment. The data collected in the study will demonstrate the various barriers preventing teachers from consistently selecting this stage of development.

**Research Methodology Applied to the Data Analysis**

This grounded theory study is based upon a social constructionism paradigm. Interviews were conducted and coded in multiple phases with a variety of strategies to make meaning of the participants’ perspectives to generate a grounded theory. Some of the codes were expected based upon the review of literature. Other codes emerged from the perceptions of the participants. The meaning derived from the data was validated through member checking and correlated with documents disseminated by the school district.
“Coding is the core process in classic grounded theory methodology. It is through coding that the conceptual abstraction of data and its reintegration as theory takes place” (Holton, 2007, p. 265). This statement certainly rings true for this grounded theory study as every coding phase (utilizing both initial and axial coding techniques) served as part of a process to generate a theory. Data collection and analysis occurred concurrently as shown in the following descriptions and visual representation, Concurrent Data Collection and Analysis.

Phase One- Interviews: Interviews conducted.

Phase Two- Initial Coding 1: The initial coding of the transcriptions involved an open coding process by analyzing each phrase and asking “what is this mostly about?” Answering this question led to the creation of a new code or connection of the phrase to a code already created. Codes continued to arise during concurrent data collection and analysis of each transcription. Patterns began to emerge through constant comparison of data and selected codes.

Phase 3- Common Codes Determined: After the first round of open coding was completed for each interview transcription, a review of this coding began. The researcher determined the most commonly selected codes across all transcriptions. A list of these most common codes was created.

Phase Four- Coding Review: With reference to the list of most common codes, the researcher made a second review of each individual transcription, analyzing each teacher’s phrases and the initial codes selected to ensure that each phrase represented and connected with the assigned code(s). During this round of coding, special attention was
paid to the list of most common codes to make sure that nothing in these codes was missed during the initial transcription review.

Phase Five: Axial Coding 1: An axial coding process began. The researcher developed a graphic organizer to group the most common codes in categories: purposeful play, leadership, professional learning, collaboration, and wishes.

Phase Six- Graphic Organizer: The researcher utilized the graphic organizer to create individual teacher data summaries. Bulleted statements were included within each code and category describing what the teacher reported about her beliefs, experiences, and preferences. Sentence starters used included but were not limited to, “You believe that…,” “___ has been impactful for you,” and “You have had ___. ” These summaries were provided to each individual teacher as part of the member checking data collection phase. Follow-up questions and directions for providing feedback were included. The graphic organizer template can be found in Appendix 3: Member Checking Graphic Organizer.

Phase Seven- Member Checking and Follow-up Questions: Each individual teacher reviewed the bulleted statements on her individual data summary. The directions provided involved an invitation to confirm or dispute any of the statements, to provide any additional feedback, and to answer the follow-up question if she had any additional information to share. During this member checking stage, each teacher responded to her data summary and answered at least some of the follow-up questions. Most feedback confirmed that the statements were true and represented the teacher’s views. Some feedback asked for the statements to be reworded. All follow-up questions responses provided additional detail, deepening the researcher’s understanding of the teachers
perspectives and experiences with play, leadership, professional learning, and collaboration.

Phase Eight- Axial Coding 2: The next phase of axial coding involved merging all individual data summaries with member checking feedback as one collective data summary representing the thoughts and experiences of the group as a whole. Bulleted statements within each graphic organizer category were copied and pasted on the merged organizer to prepare for a systematic and comprehensive review.

Phase Nine- Data Synthesis 1: The researcher utilized the collective data summary to write a first draft of a data analyses to later be utilized in this chapter under the sub heading: Presentation of Data and Results of the Analysis. This review included a study of the specific details within the codes and categories. The researcher closely studied how many teachers reported believing or experiencing a specific phenomenon and what phenomenon rose to the surface as a grounded theory.

Phase Ten- Document Review: Before making assumptions based upon the teacher interviews and member checking data, a document analysis was conducted to ensure a more accurate and valid review of data. Triangulation of data was utilized in this study because “the development of more integrated assessment strategies can create a system of checks and balances to ensure the validity of results” (Oliver-Hoyo & Allen, 2006, p. 47). The documents reviewed as data included booklets and informational handouts developed by the school district and provided to school buildings to inform procedural expectations and define quality instructional practices connected to purposeful play.
Phase Eleven- Axial Coding 3: Axial coding for this document analysis involved utilizing the same codes and categories previously developed. Each phrase of each document was coded and sorted on the same graphic organizer utilized for axial coding of the teacher interviews.

Phase Twelve- Data Synthesis 2: The document analysis data developed through axial coding was integrated with the interview and member checking data. The bulleted statements on the graphic organizer utilized to generate the document summary were integrated into the previously written first draft of the data analysis. A second draft resulted from utilizing these additional details. The second draft of the data analysis was reviewed. The researcher inserted comments in the margins of the document noting emerging theories about what influences kindergarten teachers’ implementation of quality guided play practices.
It was through each of these phases of coding, ongoing data collection, and concurrent analysis that data was conceptualized and reintegrated as a theory. This research process was well connected to a social constructionism paradigm. The member checking phase involved verifying and validating the data, but it also involved an opportunity for the participants to answer follow-up questions that were derived from the collection of interviews. The follow-up questions served as an opportunity for teachers to reflect upon their own thinking around the themes that emerged from their colleagues’ interviews. Synthesizing this data provided an opportunity to begin with the themes.
found in each individuals’ ideas and build to form a socially constructed theory through dialogue and negotiation (Andrews, 2012; Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013).

Social construction in this study also involved the contributions of the researcher herself. As described in chapter 3, the information unpacked was dependent upon three factors: (1) the individual lens from which each participant looked at their own experiences, (2) the collective lens of the group, and (3) the thinking and reflection generated through interactions with the researcher.

Presentation of Data and Results of the Analysis

Data was collected through participant interviews (including connections to the High-Quality Purposeful Play Self-Assessment), member checking, follow-up questions, and document review to answer the study’s central question and sub-questions about what professional capacity building structures influence kindergarten teachers’ implementation of guided play practices. This section describes the data that has been collected, analyzed, and synthesized to generate a grounded theory, 6 theoretical propositions, and a theory of change. Similar to the chapter 2 literature review, it has been organized in focused sections: (1) purposeful play, (2) leadership, (3) Professional Learning, and (4) Collaboration. The teachers’ wishes and barriers have also been included as separate sections.
**Purposeful Play**

**Self-Assessment.**

The High-Quality Purposeful Play Self-Assessment designed for this study was utilized qualitatively to prompt teachers’ reflection about their current level of proficiency with guided play and to deepen the interview conversation about their experiences with professional capacity building structures. When asked to share what stage teachers found themselves in most frequently on the, all explained that there was a lot of variation in the stages they selected for each item. They found it difficult to commit to one stage. During the interview, all of the teachers said something like, “I’m an overall 3 with some 4s” or “I’m still mainly in stage 2, but was also able to mark a lot of stage 3.” When asked to pick just one, the stages selected were level 3 (N=5) and level 2 (N=2). The document analysis confirmed that the High-Quality Purposeful Play Self-Assessment was directly correlated with the district High-Quality Purposeful Play “Look Fors” checklist.

*Teacher D: “I feel like I was mostly in stage three. I think I have a good handle on play, but I also know that I have a lot of holes in play in my classroom that I can definitely improve upon.”*

Some teachers (N=4) explained that their overall stage on the self-assessment took a step backward this year due to new district expectations for literacy. With these new expectations in the forefront, the focus on elevating purposeful play experiences decreased. Another factor that arose this year was the elimination of the protected paid time the play leadership team was previously provided to plan and learn together.

Teachers (N=6) explained that their self-assessment scores were lower than they would prefer in some sections due to factors beyond their control. Most (N=6) find it
difficult to meet the 60 minutes of protected time for purposeful play because their daily schedule does not allow for consistent engagement in a full hour. Teachers expressed different reasons for this, including building schedules for specialists and outdoor play spaces, challenges with different groups of children, perceived district priority on more structured, teacher-directed instruction, and the time commitment required in the new literacy curriculum.

Teacher C: “I would say a lot of the times I'm on three but sometimes it goes back to stage two. I do have the time carved out and I do have a lot of the rigor implemented, but sometimes (depending on what's happening with the school overall or the district) play has to change a little bit. If I'm being completely honest, I think in carving 30 minutes of intervention that has to be put in place, it seems like there is no wiggle room. For instance, we have the new phonics mastery guides and that's carved out time for each lesson each day. With my group, this takes longer than the allotted time and that takes away from purposeful play time. You have to assess a lot with the expectations of what they want you to assess on versus getting in there and playing and using a lot of formative assessment and higher-level questioning that drives your instruction. I think a lot of it's the time allotments. I think it's the assessments and I think it's the very structured content that takes away the freedom of play and the planning for play. You’re so busy thinking about lesson plans and learning targets and success criteria and being data driven. It all matters, but it sucks so much of your time that it’s hard to put everything else into planning for play.

To advance to a stage 4 in Domain 2 of the self-assessment requires teachers to consistently interact with children during purposeful play. All teachers expressed the importance of quality teacher-child interactions during purposeful play to advance children’s play connections to curriculum learning and academic content standards. All teachers expressed difficulty interacting with children as frequently as they would like because of the demands of assessment and district requirements for teachers to spend this time with small group interventions. For a teacher to advance to an overall rating of stage 4 on the self-assessment would require changes in district requirements and priorities.
Teachers (N=2) stated that Domain 3 of the self-assessment offered good self-reflection. They had not thought of how diversity is represented across all of their materials before. They would like to increase the availability of books, displayed pictures, and play materials that represent different races, cultures, ages, abilities, and non-traditional gender roles.

Teacher G: “I really think of adding more books, literature, and making the different things that I have more diverse. Normally the ethnicity is always just one and it is unfair. If I think about it, some kiddos would say, “yes, it looks like me,” but it doesn’t look like the other half of the class. I do need to get better. Because we don’t have the money, I get whatever is given to me. I would like to be able to change that up a little.”

Completing the self-assessment presented the teachers a valuable opportunity to engage in a guided self-reflection about their purposeful play practices. After engagement in this process, all of the teachers expressed both pride in their purposeful play practices and a desire for continuous growth. The self-assessment itself provided the teachers perspective on their personal areas of strength, their areas for potential growth, and a heightened awareness of what barriers are in the way of them meeting their highest potential.

**Elevating Time for Play.**

Being part of the district’s Transforming Kindergarten project has supported all of the teachers to elevate the amount of time spent in purposeful play in their classrooms. Before the project, the most recent amount of play time allotted to kindergarten classrooms was 30 minutes per day. The document analysis confirmed that district’s kindergarten time allotments set the expectation that children are provided with 60 minutes of purposeful play daily. During that time, teachers are expected to engage for 30
minutes with a small group intervention and 30 minutes interacting with children engaging in play.

A few (N=2) teachers reported that they previously provided two 20-minute blocks of time for play, totaling 40 minutes. These teachers reported that play was always encouraged in their school building. Some teachers (N=4) reported that they may or may not have scheduled this 30-minute time for play. If they did have time blocked off in their daily schedule, it was often not provided because they did not feel that play was a priority in their school building. A teacher (N=1) felt supported in her school building to provide play, but still struggled to work this into her daily schedule until she attended a meeting where the district’s director of elementary education suggested eliminating nap time to make time for play. All teachers still feel that time allotments are a barrier to providing the expected 60 minutes for purposeful play, but all have extended the amount of time provided, now ranging from 40 to 60 minutes each day.

After being part of the Transforming Kindergarten project, all of the teachers (N=7) now believe that providing a full 60 minutes at once (versus 2 or more smaller chunks of time) is better for children to engage in deeper and more creative thinking.

One teacher explained that before the Transforming Kindergarten project, she often cut play time or broke it into smaller chunks of time because she noticed the children were off task and could not engage meaningfully for an extended amount of time. Now that she has elevated the quality of her play, she is more comfortable elevating the amount of time children engage in play.

Teacher C: “I think when you make it more intentional, more rigorous, and you incorporate all aspects of subject areas, they're more engaged and they can stay in centers for 60 minutes and they want to keep going. You have to honestly find a way to save some of their work so that they can keep going the next day. Whereas when I first
started, I broke it into two sections because I was like, ‘they're getting off task and they're not doing what I asked them to do. And now they're getting loud and rambunctious.’ But I think if you give them a purpose and they know what is expected of them and they can push themselves with that rigor, then it’s way easier to have that 60-minute time in one chunk.”

### Elevating Intentionality.

All of the teachers described changes in their play practices due to their involvement with the Transforming Kindergarten project. All of the teachers elevated opportunities for math and literacy in connection with curriculum units, goals, and academic standards in their play areas.

*Teacher C:* “Transforming kindergarten really turned my "lightbulb on" and helped me figure out how to plan in a way that made sense. Our first meeting showed me that the best way to plan was to figure out what you wanted to do to your center/centers (I chose construction) and then build the academics out from there based on what was being covered in reading, math, and writing during that month! Once I wrapped my mind around this, planning became much easier. Transforming Kindergarten helped me become more intentional in planning my centers!”

The document analysis confirmed that the district has communicated expectations that during play, teachers will provide language-rich interaction opportunities. They will reinforce learning and introduce new concepts both with individual and small groups engaging in play. Play experiences will include student choices that provide language rich opportunities to engage in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. The play environment will be intentionally informed and intentionally planned to support standards-based, rigorous, and active learning experiences.

The words the teachers most commonly utilized to describe their play were “intentional” and “rigorous.” All of the teachers utilized these words. Most of the teachers (N=5) described their play before the project as being more free play and now as
being more intentional and rigorous. Some of the teachers (N=3) described their previous play as putting tubs of toys out and that they now have defined center areas for blocks, art, dramatic play, etc. All of the teachers explained the importance of frequent changes in the play environment to keep children excited, focused, and intentional. Some of the teachers (N=3) stated that their elevation of purposeful play has now extended into content area times of day. Their direct instruction is now more playful with more opportunities for child-initiated learning.

Teacher B: “Engaging in the transforming kindergarten work has taught me what play should look like and how to elevate the intentionality--now that I know better, I can do better :).”
Teacher F: “I feel like play is more rigorous. I think more about standards and objectives as I plan activities for play.”

All of the teachers described how their students’ play changed because of involvement in the Transforming Kindergarten project. These changes fell into 4 distinct categories as shown in the chart, Play Changes Due to the Transforming Kindergarten project: teachers’ interactions with children, children’s interactions with one another, children’s approaches to play, and children’s learning.
### Table 4.1 - Play Changes Due to the Transforming Kindergarten Project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers interactions with children</th>
<th>Children’s interactions with one another</th>
<th>Children’s approaches to play</th>
<th>Children’s learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Teachers used to facilitate small groups during play, but now prioritize as much time as possible to playing with children.</em></td>
<td><em>Children are able to solve their own social problems (both independently and with guidance).</em></td>
<td><em>Children are now more engaged and focused for longer periods of time.</em></td>
<td><em>Children are more engaged in thinking and learning.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Teachers ask higher-level questions to help children think more deeply and extend their learning.</em></td>
<td><em>The classroom is more of a community now. Children are more connected to one another.</em></td>
<td><em>Children are now more independent. They can gather their own supplies and solve their own problems.</em></td>
<td><em>With reading and math integrated in the centers, children demonstrate more sophisticated conversations and work.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Teachers know their students better and have deeper relationships with them.</em></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>There is less off-task and disruptive behavior.</em></td>
<td><em>Opportunities for whole child development (social, emotional, language, cognitive, and physical) have been advanced.</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Teacher A:** “I also place a huge emphasis on language and relationships during this time—I want children talking, questioning, explaining their activities to each other. I also want this to be a time children practice how to interact positively.”

**Teacher B:** “I implement purposeful play practices in my classroom because it gives my students the best opportunity for social emotional development, language development, cognitive/academic growth and physical development. It is powerful and I have seen positive results.”

**Teacher D:** “Play supports my children’s development in many ways: it helps their executive functioning skills, has them practice the academic skills we have been working on, and has them work on social emotional and interpersonal skills! As the saying goes ‘Play is the work of children.’”

**Teacher E:** “I think that I have also gotten to build better relationships with my students through the purposeful play interactions.”

**Teacher F:** “I’m beginning to see more higher order thinking, better peer relations, children taking more risks, and participating in class.”
Critical point of reflection.

The data collected from the self-assessment, along with the portions of the interviews focused on what play looks like in the classrooms, confirmed 2 critical details: (1) each study participant is currently a proficient guided play practitioner and (2) each study participant elevated her play practices because of involvement in the Transforming Kindergarten project. This is extremely relevant data to confirm before moving any farther with study. To understand what professional capacity building structures influence the implementation of guided play practices, it first needed to be confirmed that the participants in the study had truly built their professional capacity. Now that this has been established through data collection and analysis, the rest of the data is ready to be explored.

Leadership

District.

All of the teachers referred to the guide for purposeful play which was created through a collaboration with teachers and district leaders. The district commitment to creating this document and the dissemination of the book at a required training demonstrated for teachers that purposeful play was important to district leaders. It also provided ideas and insights for bringing it to fruition in their classrooms.

The document analysis of the guide for play confirmed that district leadership has been actively engaged in developing resources, communicating expectations, providing guidance for principals, and supporting teachers to develop understanding of purposeful play. Critical elements in the guide for play included (1) why play is important, (2) what has happened as a part of the project timeline, and (3) how to implement purposeful play
according to district expectations. These are expanded upon in the chart, District’s Guide for Play: Critical Elements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHY play is important</th>
<th>WHAT has happened as part of the project timeline</th>
<th>HOW to implement purposeful play</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Brain development is enhanced through interactions of genes with a child’s environment and experiences.</td>
<td>• District leaders and kindergarten teachers created a “Look Fors” document in 2014 illustrating best practices based on research and input from teachers, district supervisors, university early childhood faculty, and the Buffett Early Childhood Institute staff.</td>
<td>The guide for play provided guidance on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Child directed play supports balanced development of cognitive and affective learning in kindergarten.</td>
<td>• The Director of Elementary Education sent a memo to all district administrators in the fall of 2015 describing changes in kindergarten as a result of the Transforming Kindergarten project, including a copy of the “Look Fors” document and research articles.</td>
<td>• Materials to provide in a variety of centers (art, blocks, discovery, dramatic play, library/listening, math, and writing).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Play is a primary tool for learning that is developmentally appropriate. Exclusion of play opportunities undermines children’s ability to reach academic standards.</td>
<td>• “Look Fors” were distributed district-wide in the fall of 2015 and presented to the kindergarten teachers at a district curriculum day.</td>
<td>• Connections to each quarter’s big idea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Kindergarteners’ vocabulary development is positively correlated with the amount of time they spend talking with other children. Play provides this important opportunity.</td>
<td>• In 2016, the guide for play and the first 20 days of play lesson plans were created and introduced to teachers.</td>
<td>• How to align center play with math and literacy content standards being taught each quarter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Play programs have been shown to have a medium effect size on student learning.</td>
<td>• All district kindergarten teachers were required to attend a professional learning workshop in the fall of 2017. The project was named “Transforming Kindergarten.”</td>
<td>• Suggested procedures for launching play in kindergarten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cited sources- (Fisher et al., 2016; V Gmitrova &amp; Gmitrov, 2004; Miller &amp; Almon, 2009; NAEYC, 2011; Saracho, 2011)</td>
<td>• Winter 2018, the play leadership team was formed and began engagement in focused professional learning and planning.</td>
<td>• Sample lesson plans describing how to develop both a play environment and children’s awareness of how to participate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All of the teachers referred to the important role the district’s director of elementary education has had on advancing their quantity and quality in purposeful play.
practices. Her advice, encouragement, advocacy, and resources have given teachers confidence and purpose.

*Teacher D:* “*Her recommendation was such an eye opener to me. Not only that I could allow my students to play longer than the 20 minutes our time allotments said, but that she was so passionate that it should happen.*”

All of the teachers referred to the $300 budgeted by the district for each kindergarten teacher to purchase materials for play, although one teacher explained that it wasn’t the amount of money that was important because $300 does not go very far. What has been important about the money is that it demonstrates the districts’ commitment and support. The document analysis confirmed that this $300 budget for play materials was established in 2017. The participants in the study confirmed that the budget allotment continues today.

The documents created and disseminated as part of the Transforming Kindergarten project are well aligned with the quality guided play practices discussed in this study’s chapter 2 literature review. All of the teachers referred to this document positively, both as a helpful reference and as to their involvement in its creation being an impactful learning experience. The document analysis revealed that although these focused documents affirmed and illustrated play practices, documents with contradictory messages were also disseminated by the district to inform kindergarten practices.

For example, Section 12- Early Childhood in the district’s Best Instructional Practices Handbook describes 5 specific teaching strategies that apply to play, including setting up the play environment, child-initiated play, powerful interactions, guided play, and outdoor and gross motor play. Play is also referred to in other categories of this section of the document in other strategies, including student focus/expression,
investigation and inquiry-based learning, spatial sense for mathematics, literacy/language-rich mathematics and science classrooms, mathematics embedded into real world contexts, creating/planning, and real-world applications.

Although some in the district might assume that a kindergarten teacher or building principal would look at this section and think “these strategies apply to kindergarten,” it is problematic that the district refers to their preschool programs as “early childhood.” This leads to the common misperception that the strategies presented in this section of the handbook apply only to preschool classrooms. Nowhere in the section does it provide language referring to the inclusion of kindergarten or primary level classrooms to be encouraged to utilize these strategies as best instructional practices.

The document analysis shows that the framework for effective teaching booklet utilized by building administrators to guide teacher observations and the teacher appraisal system includes minimal reference to the quality guided play practices highlighted in this study’s chapter 2 literature review. At the exemplary level, child choice was referred to as part of a teacher’s understanding and use of district content standards, direct-instruction planning, efforts to manage student behavior, and engaging students in learning by self-selecting strategies. At both the distinguished and exemplary level, child choice was referred to as part of coherent instruction. None of the categories in the appraisal scoring rubric refer to the depth and breadth of child choice, time requirements to focus on innovation and creativity, or organization of the classroom environment required to elevate quality in children’s purposeful play.
**Principal.**

The teachers in this study were selected because they are all working actively to elevate play practices in their classrooms. Throughout the country, it is a common assumption that principals and other administrators discourage teachers from utilizing play practices because of high-stakes testing pressure (Bassok et al., 2016). It is connected that all of the teachers in this study confidently focus time and energy on their implementation of play practices and all of the teachers in this study describe their current principal as supportive and encouraging of purposeful play.

*Teacher D:* “I think a principal should be there to encourage, assist, and ensure that purposeful play is happening every day, but at the end of the day, play falls on the classroom teacher. You know your kids best and you know how to be intentional in a way that is engaging. Our principal enjoys seeing that our students are playing and that we teach in playful ways. I do think that our grade level meetings would be a great opportunity for more professional development or collaboration time about play, so that would be an additional way that a principal could influence play practices.”

**Teacher.**

Being part of the play leadership team has been a positive experience for all of the teachers. Some (N=3) expressed pride in being chosen as a teacher leader. Other ways teachers described their feelings about being part of the play leadership team included lucky, motivated, excited, confident, important, and positive. They felt that the experience was beneficial and led to them raising expectations of themselves. The document analysis confirmed that the play leadership team was formed in the winter of 2018 to create content aligned center activities and to host classroom visits for kindergarten teachers interested in observing intentional purposeful play in action.

*Teacher G:* “I feel actually really excited and proud to be in the group. For such a big school district, there’s not a lot of us on there. I do take pride that I was asked to be on it, but also, it’s a weight to have it because it’s not just something we say when we’re there,
but that we make sure that we're really doing it in our own classroom and we practice what we preach. I feel great but I do want to make sure that I'm doing it justice.”

All of the teachers explained that being part of the play leadership team led them to be motivated to develop play in their classrooms. Most (N=5) expressed feelings of responsibility for sharing their learning with teachers not in the group. The experiences teachers in the group had to collaborate, develop plans based upon the district’s guide for play, present at the district’s curriculum day, and plan/present at the district’s play conference pushed the teachers thinking and supported them to raise the quality of their own play practices. Most of the teachers (N=5) discussed their commitment to advocating for quality purposeful play to be universal and equitable in all district kindergarten classrooms.

*Teacher B:* “It is especially important for teacher leaders in early childhood to be advocates for early childhood as they have the opportunity to be especially impactful.”

The document analysis confirmed that a group of teacher leaders participated in drafting a “Look Fors” document illustrating what best practices look like. Upon completion, all district kindergarten teachers were invited to give feedback on the document. Teacher leaders piloted the development of the “Look Fors” in their classrooms in 2014. In spring of 2017, all district kindergarten teachers were invited to offer feedback on the updated play guide, time allotments, and an upcoming curriculum day workshop in August. The play leadership team was formed in the winter of 2018 to create content aligned center activities and to host classroom visits for kindergarten teachers interested in observing intentional purposeful play in action.
Early Childhood Instructional Leadership.

Most of the teachers (N=5) have had access to an instructional leader in their school building with expertise in early childhood education, all serving in a coaching role. Teachers described this support as beneficial because they were able to learn more about what quality play practices look like and receive specific guidance on how to make it happen in their classrooms. Instructional leaders without early childhood expertise often avoid giving coaching feedback during play because they either do not see this as a learning time or are unsure of what to look for. This unintentionally sends a message to teachers that playful learning is less valued than direct instruction (Szekely, 2013).

Having individual coaching support from a leader with expertise in early childhood is valuable. Some teachers (N=4) shared that having this coach attend grade level meetings focused on curriculum, instruction, and assessment has been beneficial. They have helped teachers connect these direct instruction expectations to their purposeful play practices, elevating academic opportunities for children during play. One of the teachers who has not had access to an early childhood instructional leader explained that she thinks leaders should be trained to understand the developmental aspects of the child, the importance of young children’s growing brains, and how children best develop.

*Teacher A:* “They help center and elevate best practices in early childhood. They understand the amount of planning, set up and collaboration needed (with fellow teachers as well as with families) for this age group. Time together is highly focused and impacts early childhood teaching and learning when leadership has a strong understanding of this age group.”
Professional Learning

Play Leadership Team Learning.

Being part of the play leadership team has provided teachers with increased access to professional learning. All of the teachers reported that their learning has increased because of their opportunities to learn together with the other teachers on the play leadership team. Shared professional development experiences have provided them opportunities to talk about the content with one another to promote higher levels of understanding and increased perspective.

Teacher D: “I've always enjoyed going into other teacher's classrooms. I think that the best professional development is just getting to see what other people do. Getting to be a part of the team, I feel like I have learned a lot from the other ladies and I've gotten the opportunity to be in some of their classrooms. That was really helpful just for me to see what they were doing. We've just had the opportunity to work and grow together.”

The district’s director of elementary education frequently provides articles and purchases professional books focused on play for the teacher leaders’ classroom libraries. Most of the teachers (N=5) credited these resources with their increased learning. The videos shared of play-based kindergarten classrooms across the country and opportunities the teachers have had to visit one another’s classrooms have been impactful because it has made the information interactive, visual, and hands-on. It has helped them piece together what they want play to look like in their own classrooms.

Time.

Most of the teachers (N=6) expressed a desire for more time for professional development both with the play leadership team and their building kindergarten teams. There was common agreement that growth of purposeful play practices is enhanced when
teachers engage in focused professional learning in community with others and that growth is hindered when not provided sufficient time. All of the teachers described the benefits of their quarterly opportunities to have their classrooms covered by substitute teachers for the day to be provided time for professional learning.

**Content.**

The document analysis confirmed that the district has made efforts to provide professional learning opportunities to support all district kindergarten teachers to elevate their purposeful play practices. “Look Fors” were distributed district-wide in the fall of 2015 and presented to the kindergarten teachers at a district curriculum day event to provide information about quality play practices. In 2016, the guide for play and lesson plans for the first 20 days of play were created and introduced to teachers in the fall curriculum day to expand their understanding of play and to provide guidance for their play procedures. All district kindergarten teachers were required to attend a professional learning workshop in the fall of 2017 naming the initiative “Transforming Kindergarten.”

The teachers on the play leadership team engaged in quarterly professional learning together in 7 half-day sessions over a 2-year period. Content focused on elevating purposeful play practices in their classrooms and providing them with insights to enhance the plans and presentations they were responsible for sharing with their kindergarten teacher colleagues across the district. The content the most teachers (N=6) found influential was learning about how to have powerful interactions with children during play (Dombro, Jablon, & Stetson, 2011b). Other important learning included
higher-level questioning (N=3) and how to stage the classroom environment for play (N=3).

During the member checking phase, the participants viewed the chart representing their shared experiences with professional learning content. This chart is included as Appendix 2: The Play Leadership Team’s Shared Professional Learning Experiences. It illustrates the professional learning workshops the group engaged in and how these are connected to a teacher’s role during guided play. The teachers were asked the question, “What content has been important for your learning?” Answers included the following:

**Teacher A:** “My top areas of importance have been executive functioning, powerful interactions and social emotional learning using a developmental continuum.”

**Teacher B:** “Using a developmental continuum has been important for my learning because it is a clear way to see where students are and where they need to go. Then, using this information, I can determine learning activities that will help students meet their developmental goals.”

**Teacher D:** “How to have powerful interactions and observing, documenting, and using a developmental continuum have been incredibly important for me. As a kindergarten teacher who did not study early childhood in college, these concepts were completely new to me, and have helped me tremendously in my classroom! Both of these topics seem very daunting, but they were broken down in a way that made sense and I could go back and apply them in my classroom.”

**Teacher RE:** “Learning about understanding the child to be able to meet individual needs and abilities through play. Learning about how to update materials to challenge students as the year goes on and using the open-ended questioning to draw them into conversation and encourage their ideas during play.”

**Teacher F:** “The professional development that I have received as part of the host team, has been excellent. The checklists and written materials have been good guides. The PD during host team has been the “fly paper” for revisiting and building on the many tenets of play.”

**Collaboration**

**Collective Efficacy.**

During her interview, Teacher A shared the quote “healing happens in community” and her belief that all good things happen in community. She explained that
the level of quality in her play practices is directly connected with the amount of time she is able to spend with other teachers who are also dedicated to this work. The time spent connecting, sharing ideas, learning, and supporting one another is invaluable. Collective efficacy supports teachers to implement purposeful play at the high level required to maximize children’s opportunities for learning and development. When connections with colleagues are frequent, play is purposeful. When connections are limited, play plateaus (or even takes a step back). All 7 of the teachers expressed agreement with this notion.

*Teacher A:* “Engagement with others around any issue, but especially a district-wide expectation, is key. Working with others around a similar goal lets us not only share ideas, but be inspired by each other. It also makes things seem within reach when we can talk with others about how they are doing things, or as for feedback on roadblocks I am facing. It is so powerful to be able to talk to other ‘experts in the field’ because they are up against the same hurdles (time, support, other initiatives) that I am trying to make sense of.”

A key element in the effective collaboration of the play leadership team includes shared passion and purpose. All 7 of the teachers explained that they have felt motivated, inspired, and supported by the collective commitment of the group.

*Teacher C:* “The play committee is one of the biggest supports because there are teachers who are in the same position as you who understand the challenges and the barriers. They are someone to voice and ping pong ideas off of who understand. They are not someone higher up telling you one thing, but not actually being able to provide the hands-on experience behind it. They're your colleagues, they're your peers, they're your tribe. They’re a good reflection of what I’m thinking and saying and they understand. They're good motivation to keep going. And even though there are challenges, they have the same interests at heart.”

*Teacher F:* Sometimes you feel like you should be doing more, but when you meet with the host team you are reminded that you can’t do everything. It is helpful to see that everyone has challenges.

Although each teacher in the study has been involved in a shared experience of collaboration with the play leadership team, they have each had different experiences
collaborating with colleagues in their school buildings and wider networks of teacher friends. One teacher feels fully in sync with and empowered by her school-based kindergarten team. They collaborate to plan, teach, and learn together about play. Most of the teachers (N=5) have at least one colleague on their team that they can collaborate with to advance their play practices. They may or may not plan for play or learn about play together, but they do have shared commitment and respect for play in the classroom. One teacher does not collaborate with any of the teachers on her school-based kindergarten team focused on play practices. Their collaboration is solely focused on teacher-directed academic instruction. They do not share a commitment for implementing play. This teacher described more barriers and fewer examples of feeling supported in implementing play practices.

**Time**

All 7 teachers shared the importance of being provided substitute teachers on a quarterly basis to allow for protected time to collaborate with the play leadership team. Increased time to collaborate with colleagues during the work day has been very impactful in each teacher’s implementation of purposeful play practices. Substitutes and protected time are no longer provided. Each teacher explained that it is now harder to plan and find inspiration to implement purposeful play.

*Teacher D:* “We don't get to meet any more during the school day which stinks because our time together has been a lot shorter this year. Getting to meet four full days the last two years has been really helpful because we got interrupted time to plan and to learn. I think this is the biggest thing we have a shortage of in education.”

*Teacher G:* When you don't have that collaboration time, you get overwhelmed by yourself and it does seem like a big obstacle. If you have 10 play centers you're trying to create, it seems overwhelming to do that by yourself. When you can talk to other people and build that community, it is so nice just to share ideas with each other.”
Collective Commitment

During the member checking stage, teachers were asked the question “How would you describe the collective commitment of the host team? Responses collected were as follows:

Teacher A: “Our host team is excited and energized about play—we have some teachers that are very hands on and jump right in with many great ideas. We have other teachers that love the research and theory behind it and are more methodical in putting play out. We have a variety of student demographics being served. It is great that whatever our individual play ‘style’ is, we all value play, and value listening to each other.”

Teacher B: “The host team respects that all kindergarten teachers are at different levels of learning regarding purposeful play in their classrooms and understands that it will take time to implement purposeful play with rigor and fidelity district wide.”

Teacher D: “Everyone did their part and we were always willing to be vulnerable with one another and share our own ideas. We all believed in the power of what we were doing and were committed to the extra time our group needed to help our students and colleagues.”

Teacher E: “Dedicated. Teachers that are willing to give up time in the classroom reaching students to learn more about best practices. Teachers that are willing to give up time and energy to inform others of their learning.

Teacher F: “The host team has committed to including all kindergarten teachers through the planning of PD Blasts, Presentations, Meetings, Resources, and ideas.”

Wishes

Teacher A frequently spoke of wishes throughout her interview. Sharing wishes seemed to be particularly relevant in answering the research question to learn what influences teachers to implement guided play practices in their classrooms. Because I found this particularly interesting, I concluded each teacher’s interview by asking them their wishes for purposeful play, leadership, professional learning, and collaboration. These are included in the chart, Participant Wishes.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Purposeful Play</th>
<th>Leadership</th>
<th>Professional Learning</th>
<th>Collaboration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Play in kindergarten is both equitable and sustainable system-wide for both the kids and the teachers.</td>
<td>Play is kept consistently on the forefront as new initiatives take center stage</td>
<td>Learn how to collect evidence to capture what children are doing during play to show the value of play in kindergarten for children’s learning.</td>
<td>Give teachers time together paid to collaborate around play.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>More time to plan for purposeful play so that you can implement it with fidelity. You need time to bring it to the highest level.</td>
<td>Leaders learn about the importance and understand the development of early childhood students in general so that everyone is on the same page.</td>
<td>Be provided more early childhood focused professional learning opportunities to make our classrooms better and learn how to better serve our students.</td>
<td>For everyone to be provided more time to collaborate with a team that has a passion to learn like we have had with the transforming kindergarten teacher leadership group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Continued support of purposeful play so teachers can continue to grow, change, adapt, and become better at it.</td>
<td>A consistent district-wide focus on purposeful play. Don’t push it aside.</td>
<td>Provide opportunities for professional learning focused on purposeful play without requiring teachers to take their own personal days.</td>
<td>Expand the number of teachers involved in collaboration through quarterly meetings, coffee chats, conferences, shared idea boards, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Every classroom through third grade engages in play. It may look different as children get older, but every child would benefit from opportunities to play in high-</td>
<td>More early childhood expert coaches providing insight specific to early childhood practices</td>
<td>More time to learn from each other during grade level meetings to plan for play and talk about what you’re doing.</td>
<td>Your wish for collaboration is that there would be more time. As part of your graduate work, you have developed a way to do this because you think this is extremely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>quality, intentional play centers every day throughout the elementary years.</td>
<td>important and something that is missing for educators.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Play is as important as any other academic time with just as much focus given to planning and preparing as for teacher-directed instruction.</td>
<td>Understand the importance of play in kindergarten. Provide the same level of support for play in kindergarten that is provided for PreK.</td>
<td>More opportunities for professional learning focused on play, such as book studies or presentations by experts. More time to collaborate and plan for ways to bring academic standards into the centers so there are more ideas to share with all teachers in the district.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>More protected time for children to play and more space in classrooms to develop engaging play areas.</td>
<td>Leaders provide guidance about how to develop play.</td>
<td>Learn how to promote student collaboration, discovery, creativity, and learning. Visit other classrooms to see how someone else does it. Have more time to collaborate with the teacher leadership group and your own kindergarten team to share ideas of what is working well in classrooms.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>Play is seen as a necessity for the classroom and just as important as any other academic subject.</td>
<td>Leaders collaborate with other leaders so they are better support for their teachers’ implementation of play practices.</td>
<td>More opportunities for teachers to engage in professional learning with experts in purposeful play because it provides inspiration and motivation. Time is what you need. Your time for collaboration is currently limited and what you do have is not focused on play. More time to connect, learn from, and plan for play with colleagues would be beneficial.</td>
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</table>

**Barriers**

Having limited time to focus on purposeful play is the most significant barrier described by the teachers. Although each teacher explained that the protected time to
engage in professional learning and collaboration was a benefit and an influencer for them, they each also explained that they do not feel they have enough time to engage in these important experiences. They appreciate that their involvement on the play leadership team provided them more time to learn and work together than the average teacher, but feel all teachers would benefit from this opportunity. Advancing the quantity and quality of play in all kindergarten classrooms districtwide for all kindergarten students would be advanced if all teachers were allowed the opportunity to have this protected time.

Time is also a barrier in teacher’s daily schedules. Time allotments required by the district are challenging to meet. Because traditionally academic, teacher-directed times of day are a perceived priority, teachers are rarely able to provide the full 60 minutes designated for purposeful play. Balancing the scheduling demands means that 40 minutes for play is more common.

Time is also a barrier in teacher-child interactions. The district requires teachers to engage in interventions with a small group for 30 minutes of the 60-minute allotment for purposeful play during the second semester. Because of this and the reality that few teachers are able to provide the full 60 minutes, time to interact with children to build personal connections and elevate connections to curriculum and standards is limited.

Although the teachers perceived their principal as supportive and expressed pride in their district for committing to the Transforming Kindergarten project, all of the teachers (N=7) described meeting the expectations to elevate both the time for play and the quality of the play has been challenging. Barriers have included a perceived priority on direct instruction of curriculum, limited time to collaborate, limited opportunities to
engage in play focused professional learning, scheduling conflicts, and the requirement of teachers to engage in small group intervention while children play (limiting opportunities for teacher-child interactions).

Although the document analysis revealed multiple examples of communication supporting teachers to schedule 60 minutes of play, be provided $300 to purchase play materials, and to inform what play could look like, contrary messages were also revealed. The teacher appraisal documents do not include language in support of teacher’s play practices. The expectations outlined in the teacher appraisal system are based upon direct instruction practices alone. The elements of child choice included in the appraisal documents are connected with the independent stage of the gradual release process and do not connect to the essential elements of guided play.

The district’s comprehensive handbook outlining and describing evidence-based instructional strategies includes limited references to guided play practices. (As discussed in the section focused on district leadership) The play strategies included in the handbook are designated for “early childhood.” Because the district refers to their preschool programs as “early childhood,” if it is desired for kindergarten teachers to utilize these strategies, clearer communication and branding about which grade levels are considered “early childhood” would be beneficial.
Summary

The findings in this constructivist grounded theory study are connected to the central question, what professional capacity building structures influence kindergarten teachers’ implementation of guided play practices? The data analysis revealed that each of the participants demonstrate proficiency in guided play practices according to the High-Quality Purposeful Play Self-Assessment. The data analysis also revealed that the participants’ implementation of guided play practices was influenced in varying degrees by all three professional capacity building structures: leadership, professional learning, and collaboration. Specific experiences with these structures emerged as influential elements to answer the study’s sub-questions and will be explored in chapter 5.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4.4: Study Questions Answered</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Central Question</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| What professional capacity building structures influence kindergarten teachers’ implementation of guided play practices? | All 3 professional capacity building structures are influential.  
  • Collaboration (most influential)  
  • Leadership  
  • Professional Learning |
| **Sub-Questions**                   |
| What district and building level leadership practices do kindergarten teachers identify as influencing their implementation of guided play? | • Clear vision and expectations for play  
  • Instructional leaders knowledgeable in early childhood development and pedagogy  
  • Communication and connections about play across systems (district-building-classroom)  
  • Opportunities for shared leadership and teacher leadership |
| What professional learning experiences do kindergarten teachers identify as influencing their implementation of guided play? | • Time to learn about play  
  • Engagement in shared learning with colleagues  
  • Professional learning content focused on play  
  • Opportunities to explore with colleagues how to connect play to district expectations for curriculum, instruction, and assessment |
| What collaboration experiences with colleagues do kindergarten teachers identify as influencing their implementation of guided play practices? | • Time to work collaboratively with colleagues  
  • Engagement in a group with shared passion and collective commitment  
  • Opportunities to actualize collective efficacy |
Chapter 5: Discussion, Implications, Recommendations

Summary of the Results

In many schools throughout the nation, time for play in kindergarten has been reduced and even eliminated over the last decade (Almon & Miller, 2011). For schools that still allow play in kindergarten, professional learning for educators aimed at developing playful classroom environments and effective teacher-child interactions takes a backseat to professional learning focused on direct instruction, curriculum, and assessment. Educators also have limited opportunities to collaborate with one another through shared learning and collective work. It is of great significance to learn which leadership, professional learning, and collaboration practices advance educators’ will and skill to implement guided play practices in kindergarten.

The literature reviewed for this study was organized in two categories: guided play and professional capacity building. Section one described why guided play is a valuable approach for children’s learning and what quality guided play looks like in kindergarten. Section two described effective leadership, professional learning, and collaboration practices aimed at advancing the implementation of guided play in kindergarten.

This grounded theory study is based upon a social constructionism paradigm. Interviews were conducted and coded in multiple phases with a variety of strategies to make meaning of the participants’ perspectives to generate a grounded theory. Some of the codes were expected based upon the review of literature. Other codes emerged from the perceptions of the participants. The meaning derived from the data was validated
through member checking and correlated with documents disseminated by the school district.

The evidence collected in this study through the High-Quality Purposeful Play Self-Assessment (Appendix 1) and the portion of the participants’ interviews describing their journey with play demonstrated that play practices in their classrooms developed overtime during their work with the Transforming Kindergarten project and are now proficient. The study found that educators’ engagement with leadership, professional learning, and collaboration all influence guided play practices. The participants’ perspectives were utilized to find which aspects of these structures they found most valuable. These will be discussed here in chapter 5.

Discussion of the Results

This section will answer the central research question and sub-questions by weaving together what was learned from the literature review with what was learned from the findings of the study. Through the synthesis of this information, a grounded theory, six theoretical propositions, and a theory of change have emerged. These will be explored in detail and presented to inform essential elements of effective leadership, professional learning, and collaboration aimed at advancing kindergarten teachers’ implementation of guided play practices.

**What district and building level leadership practices do kindergarten teachers identify as influencing their implementation of guided play?**

The director of elementary education was influential in the participants’ implementation of guided play practices. Effective leadership involves setting a clear
vision that promotes common understanding about what and how young children learn (Goffin, 2013; NAESP, 2016). The participants made it clear that this district leader shared her passion for play in kindergarten, her expectation that play be extended to 60 minutes a day, and her vision for integrating academic content into play experiences. This clear message from the district office empowered participants to implement play. It gave them confidence that (although other priorities felt more valued by some colleagues and leaders) someone perceived as “higher up” was giving permission, encouragement, and direction.

The creation of the guide for play was another way district level leadership influenced the participants’ implementation of guided play practices. Critical elements in the guide for play included sections on the importance of play, what happened over the course of the project timeline, and how to implement purposeful play according to district expectations. The guide made guided play expectations concrete for educators across the school system (district leaders, building principals, instructional coaches, teachers, and paraprofessionals). This clarity of purpose and practice was identified influential.

The elevation of guided play practices was advanced because school leaders effectively communicated a vision for play to all educators at each level of the school system using the guide for play and discussion points at various meetings. This is important. When leaders share a clear vision, goal consensus, and task orientation, instructional practices are higher quality and child outcomes are advanced (Pacchiano et al., 2016).

Between the guide for play and the direction from district leadership, expectations for play were clear. The participants of this study understood that play was to be extended
to a 60-minute block of time. They knew that literacy and mathematics experiences were
to be integrated in the center areas. They knew their interactions with children during
play should be connected to curriculum objectives. These elements were included in the
guide for play and spoken about in meetings by the director of elementary education.
This data confirms that the play leadership team received effective communication both
orally and in written documents about the vision, procedures, and expectations of the
Transforming Kindergarten project.

The study also demonstrated that teachers were encouraged and supported across
the system to implement guided play practices. Research shows that desired practices are
advanced when leaders at all levels of school systems (including district administrators,
curriculum supervisors, school principals, instructional coaches, and teachers) provide
attention, focused work, and leadership toward implementation (Sebring et al., 2006;
Vangrieken et al., 2017).

Just as the director of elementary education encouraged confidence in play, the
principals’ also supported the participants to engage in new learning and try new
strategies. The building principal is the school leader at the forefront so for new practices
to be implemented effectively, it is particularly important that he or she be supportive.
The literature shows that a principal plays a critically important role in teachers’
implementation and development of quality practices (Bryk, Bender Sebring,
Allensworth, Easton, & Luppescu, 2010). “Our framework asserts that principal
leadership is a catalyst for change and a key driver of the development of the other
essential supports” (Sebring et al., 2006, p. 30).
The self-assessment confirmed each of the participants as proficient guided play practitioners. Each participant reported that their play practices developed as part of the project and each felt that play was supported by their principal. These factors are connected. Through this correlation, an assumption can be made that a principal’s support matters. A teachers’ perception of his/her principal’s support is influential in their implementation of guided play practices.

Being a teacher leader inspired quality in the participants’ intrapersonal (their own classroom) and interpersonal (play advocacy for their colleagues and district) aspects of teaching and professionalism. Being viewed as a play leader made them feel responsible and motivated for implementing play practices at the highest level possible. Being engaged in district level planning and presenting made them feel proud and committed to doing good work for their colleagues. Opportunities to engage as teacher leaders were influential in the participants’ implementation of guided play practices.

**What professional learning experiences do kindergarten teachers identify as influencing their implementation of guided play?**

The play leadership team experienced opportunities to learn about and plan for play in both a workshop format and through self-initiated topics. The team had extended time to reflect and applied their learning to their own classrooms. The professional learning experiences were enhanced because the participants did not learn in isolation. They shared in learning as a community of practice. Through being provided time to reflect upon their learning together as a team, participants gained new ideas, support, and motivation. Shared learning occurred through both formal and informal conversations, co-planning opportunities, and peer modeling. This resulted in participants’ ability to
apply what they learned while strengthening new behaviors, new practices, and new pedagogies.

The shared engagement in ongoing professional learning with the play leadership team helped content become more explicit and sustainable. The data showed that teachers were able to expand upon content and apply new ideas more effectively because of their frequent opportunities to learn from and with each other. In the literature, “the goal of the professional learning community is to foster professional learning in a setting in which the practitioner’s experience and expertise are utilized, the contributions of the learner are valued, and opportunities for reflection are many” (Gerdes & Jefferson, 2015, p. 9). These three critical elements were all present in the professional learning experiences of the play leadership team.

Table 5.1 - What do communities of practice look like? represents suggestions found in the literature about how communities develop their practice through engagement in a variety of activities. The data shows that the play leadership team engaged in these activities. Engaging in shared learning as a community was influential.
### Table 5.1 - What do communities of practice look like?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>“Can we work on this design and brainstorm some ideas; I’m stuck.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requests for information</td>
<td>“Where can I find the code to connect to the server?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeking experience</td>
<td>“Has anyone dealt with a customer in this situation?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reusing assets</td>
<td>“I have a proposal for a local area network I wrote for a client last year. I can send it to you and you can easily tweak it for this new client.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordination and synergy</td>
<td>“Can we combine our purchases of solvent to achieve bulk discounts?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building an argument</td>
<td>“How do people in other countries do this? Armed with this information it will be easier to convince my Ministry to make some changes.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growing confidence</td>
<td>“Before I do it, I’ll run it through my community first to see what they think.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussing developments</td>
<td>“What do you think of the new CAD system? Does it really help?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documenting projects</td>
<td>“We have faced this problem five times now. Let us write it down once and for all.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visits</td>
<td>“Can we come and see your after-school program? We need to establish one in our city.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mapping knowledge and identifying gaps</td>
<td>“Who knows what, and what are we missing? What other groups should we connect with?”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Wenger & Trayner-Wenger, 2015, p. 3)

The teachers found the professional learning content focused on Powerful Interactions (Dombro et al., 2011b) extremely impactful in their development of guided play practices. The communication as part of Transforming Kindergarten project sent a message about the critical role teachers’ interactions with children play in facilitating children’s learning through play. It was through ongoing professional learning focused on Powerful Interactions that teachers were able to understand how to do this and apply this practice in their classrooms. This was valuable because “professional learning that
focuses on generic strategies or general principles that are divorced from their day-to-day practice is less likely to impact teachers’ application of what they learn or improve student outcomes” (Sawyer & Ramirez Stukey, 2019, p. 9).

The data showed that the guidance received through the Powerful Interactions book, workshop sessions, coaching opportunities, and reflective conversations with colleagues provided participants with an explicit and accessible formula to guide their interactions. They learned how to be present with children, meaningfully connect with them, and extend their learning. They were able to transfer the theory of this learning to practice. The data showed that teachers felt confident to apply this learning content with fidelity right away because of the simplicity of the formula describing the approach. One teacher explained that in hindsight, engagement in Powerful Interactions seems obvious but she was not practicing this technique until it was explicitly brought to her attention. Powerful Interactions provided a learning experience that was pivotal in the participants’ capacity to implement effective guided play in their classrooms.

This finding is important because it demonstrates how clarity of content, ongoing professional learning experiences, a specific formula for action, and opportunities to practice are essential elements that make learning effective and more likely to translate into practice. The Powerful Interactions learning content is significant to guided play implementation. Quality teacher-child interactions are essential components to support a child’s engagement in the level of higher-level thinking required to promote cognitive development (which supports academic growth) (Weisberg et al., 2013, 2016).

A study comparing teacher-directed and child-directed pretend play found a significant positive correlation between a teacher’s involvement in play and children’s
cognitive development \( (R = 0.0805, p < 0.0001, n = 21) \) (Gmitrova & Gmitrov, 2003).

Another study demonstrated that the types of interactions between teachers and children can determine how well children learn and how effective teachers are at conveying given concepts or lessons (Lara-Cinisomo et al., 2009). The Powerful Interactions professional learning content and focused experiences were influential in the implementation of quality guided play practices.

*What collaboration experiences with colleagues do kindergarten teachers identify as influencing their implementation of guided play practices?*

What emerged most clearly and consistently in the data analysis was how much the participants’ valued their experiences collaborating with one another as part of the play leadership team. They also valued their experiences working and learning together with other colleagues and administrators. Throughout the interviews teachers frequently expressed how much they wish their colleagues who were not part of the team could experience the same opportunities for collaboration that they experienced as part of the group. Teachers explained that shared learning, shared planning, and shared action around developing their play practices was influential. Collaboration emerged as critically important in influencing the participants’ guided play practices. They felt that when connections with colleagues (especially the play leadership team) were frequent, play in their classrooms was more purposeful. When connections were limited, they were sad to report that their play practices would plateau (or even take a step back). They each spoke of the relationship between the quality of their play and the frequency and quality of their connections with one another.
“Collective teacher efficacy refers to educators’ shared beliefs that through their combined efforts they can positively influence student outcomes” (Donohoo, 2018, p. 323). All 7 of the teachers interviewed expressed that being part of the play leadership team was powerful for them. With the group, they shared a common belief that they could do great things together for their own students and their school district.

The phenomenon of collective efficacy being powerful is well aligned with the literature. John Hattie’s meta-analysis of high impact strategies shows collective efficacy as one of the top factors influencing student achievement (Hattie, 2010). Research focused on improvement in early education showed that the way teachers work together to continuously improve is more important and predictive of achievement than any individual teacher or school improvement effort (Pacchiano et al., 2016, p. 47).

The data collected in this study shows that the participants’ experience with the play leadership team connects to 4 processes proven to drive collective efficacy, (1) learning together, (2) cause-and-effect relationships, (3) goal-directed behavior, and (4) purposeful practice through mastery experiences. Jenni Donohoo would describe the play leadership team experience as a mastery experience. “Mastery experiences show high-powered teams that they are capable of achieving great things together. As teams recognize that their efforts are paying off, they begin to increase their confidence in each other and, as a result, push each other to do even greater things” (Donohoo & Katz, 2019, p. 29).

To bring the true power of collective efficacy to fruition, participants expressed the value of frequent protected time for collaboration. Teacher B shared that her wish would be “for everyone to be provided more time to collaborate with a team that has a
passion to learn like we have had with the transforming kindergarten teacher leadership group.” This statement was echoed in different ways by each of the teachers. This group had passion which became collective passion because they were provided time to engage with one another in shared learning and shared work. Collective passion with committed individuals engaged in a unified mission influenced the implementation of guided play practices.

**Grounded Theory- Conclusion Based on the Results:**

Although elements of each professional capacity building structure (leadership, professional learning, and collaboration) did emerge from the data, they did not emerge as equally sized and distributed puzzle pieces. If the data was to be assembled in the form of a puzzle, pieces that represent collaboration would create the focal picture. Pieces that represent leadership and professional learning would create the borders. This visualization is critical to understanding the grounded theory that emerged. Collaboration is the main idea of the story. How leadership and professional learning support, inform, encourage, and facilitate the collaboration are the essential supporting details.
Implications of the Study

To expand upon the grounded theory and deepen understanding of the study’s implications, six theoretical propositions have emerged. These represent the essence of what influences kindergarten teachers to implement guided play practices in their classrooms. As represented in the puzzle visualization, the grounded theory shows collaboration as the primary influencer, leadership and professional learning as secondary, supporting influencers. The following theoretical propositions emerged through systematic empirical research and demonstrate the most critical elements of the
professional capacity building structures in influencing guided play practices. These theoretical propositions add context to the grounded theory and can be visualized as a theory of change for influencing guided play practices.

*Theoretical Proposition I*

**Empower collective efficacy.** This proposition is an element of collaboration that arose from the data as influential in the participants’ implementation of guided play practices. It involves time, space, and encouragement to develop community, support one another, engage in cooperative planning, share a common passion, and take collective action. “Fostering collective teacher efficacy is a timely and important issue if we are going to realize success for all students. When a school staff shares the belief that through their collective actions they can positively influence student outcomes, student achievement increases” (Donohoo, 2017, p. xv).

Examples of how the participants in the study experienced collective efficacy include:

- collective commitment to play in kindergarten
- ongoing communication through email, text, and personal visits
- planning for play experiences to be implemented in classrooms district-wide
- collaboratively presenting at trainings and conferences.
- Emotional support
Theoretical Proposition II

Prioritize clarity in vision, priorities, procedures, and expectations. This proposition is an element of leadership that arose from the data as influential in the participants’ implementation of guided play practices. It involves taking action based upon a coherent understanding of the purpose, procedural expectations, and expected outcomes. “A shared vision provides the big picture from the outset; this ensures that each partner sees clearly how their organization or professional role will support this vision and keeps them engaged in the collaborative work” (Patterson et al., 2018, p. 2).

Examples of how the participants in the study experienced clarity in vision, priorities, procedures, and expectations include:

- The guide for play
- Ongoing communication (speeches and presentations) from the director of elementary education with kindergarten teachers
- Disseminated documents for kindergarten teachers, principals, and instructional leaders (kindergarten “Look Fors,” time allotments, monthly PD email blast)

Theoretical Proposition III

Nurture systems of support. This proposition is an element of leadership that arose from the data as influential in the participants’ implementation of guided play practices. It involves clear communication, support, and commitment among educators at all levels of school systems (school board members, district administrators, building administrators, instructional leaders, teachers, and paraprofessionals). “A common denominator in schools with improving performance is this combination of
instructionally focused leadership and the creation of supportive conditions and systems for teachers that allow them to collaboratively build craft and knowledge together, on the school site, based on consistently applied protocols and norms” (Pacchiano et al., 2016, p. 9).

Examples of how the participants in the study experienced systems of support include:

- Perceived support and encouragement from building and district administrators
- Ongoing training and dissemination of documents informing purposeful play procedures and expectations
- The aligned expectations of building and district administrators, articulated through disseminated documents (kindergarten “Look Fors” and time allotments)

Theoretical Proposition IV

Elevate teachers as leaders. This proposition is an element of leadership that arose from the data as influential in the participants’ implementation of guided play practices. Being perceived as leaders fosters teachers’ belief, confidence, motivation, engagement, creativity, productivity, and persistence. A 2013 article in Educational Leadership discussed the many ways that teachers act as leaders: (1) from the classroom, (2) by teaching well, (3) by collaborating, (4) through inquiry, and (5) by developing partnerships. “We should not underestimate the powerful leadership role played by teachers who build relationships from their classrooms outward, thus transforming themselves, their students, their students’ families, their colleagues, and their communities” (Collay, 2013, p. 76).
Examples of how the participants in the study engaged as teacher leaders include:

- Collaboratively generating plans and tools for kindergarten teachers to utilize district-wide
- Supporting their school-based kindergarten team to develop play practices
- Engaging in collaborative problem solving and inquiry to improve and expand play practices
- Sharing their voices with administrators to develop understanding of play and inform decision-making
- Developing partnerships with one another and others with early childhood expertise
- Making their own choices about professional learning topics and processes
- Presenting at district curriculum day workshops
- Planning and presenting a district play conference
- Writing monthly district-wide PD blast email

**Theoretical Proposition V**

**Expand opportunities for ongoing, shared learning.** This proposition is an element of professional learning that arose from the data as influential in the participants’ implementation of guided play practices. Engaging in shared learning within a trusting community maximizes learning potential because participants not only learn from the content and facilitator, they also learn from one another. They have increased opportunities to engage in metacognitive exploration through extended discussion and reflection. Shared learning enhances both interpersonal and intrapersonal structures in
support of educators’ learning and development. “Within learning communities, members exchange feedback about their practice with one another, visit each other's classrooms or work settings, and share resources. Learning community members strive to refine their collaboration, communication, and relationship skills to work within and across both internal and external systems to support student learning. They develop norms of collaboration and relational trust and employ processes and structures that unleash expertise and strengthen capacity to analyze, plan, implement, support, and evaluate their practice” (Learning Forward, 2011a, p. 2).

Examples of how the participants in the study experienced ongoing, shared learning include:

- Gaining new ideas from each other for classroom organization, play materials, and plans for play
- Visiting each other’s classrooms to visualize adaptations for own classroom play environment
- Sharing articles, blogs, and social media posts related to guided play
- Simultaneously exploring the same professional learning content during workshops
- Digging deeper into professional learning content through reflective conversations during workshops
- Discussing and sharing ideas for application of professional learning content during workshops
- Ideas for problem-solving, troubleshooting, and refining practices
Theoretical Proposition VI

Provide focused, connected professional learning content. This proposition is an element of professional learning that arose from the data as influential in the participants’ implementation of guided play practices. Kindergarten teachers receive professional learning opportunities from their school buildings and districts focused on curriculum, instruction, and assessment. These are critical, but to be responsive to the specific developmental needs of young learners’ and to develop strategies that best meet these needs, educators need professional learning experiences that develop understanding and application of quality guided play practices. The specific pedagogies and evidence-based practices that best support young learners are a non-existent element in current elementary school professional learning.

The play leadership team in this study participated in play focused professional learning and articulated how this learning changed their play practices. The value of play focused professional learning is also supported in the literature. “In order for teachers to become genuine play pedagogos, they have to know both the theoretical and practical approaches of play. Interpretively, I recommend that a play pedagogical framework for teacher training should consider the following: the variables of each play type (e.g. zooming into scenario and role development for socio-dramatic play); the continuum of children’s play skills (simple and complicated expected actions) that lead towards mature forms of the specific type of play (e.g. explore a non-stereotypical scenario for a long period of time) and then, accordingly, a set of teacher-focused involvement actions (e.g. ask questions in order to elaborate children’s scenario or role) to promote mature forms of play” (Loizou, 2017 p. 794).
Examples of how the participants in the study experienced focused, connected professional learning are reflected in the chart included as Appendix 2: The Play Leadership Team’s Shared Professional Learning Experiences.

Figure 5.2- Theoretical Propositions
Theory of Change

The grounded theory and theoretical propositions that emerged act as the contributions this study makes to field of research. The theory of change acts as the contribution to the field of practice. The purpose of including a theory of change is to inform decision-making about leadership, professional learning, and collaboration experiences that promote the implementation of guided play practices in kindergarten. It provides direction on how to translate the research from the study into practice.

The theory of change illustrates the story of guided play practice implementation in the participants’ classrooms and advice on how the same results can be replicated in other districts, schools, and classrooms. The inputs are the professional capacity building structures identified as influential and articulated as theoretical propositions. These inputs impact teacher behaviors, elevating their belief, confidence, motivation, engagement, creativity, productivity, and persistence. These teacher behaviors work to develop guided play practices in kindergarten classrooms. The evidence of this development is demonstrated through three indicators: playful classroom environments, teacher-child interactions, and play integrated with curriculum content. The outputs of the theory of change involve quality play experiences in support of children’s development and life-long learning. These outputs have been demonstrated in the data and act as evidence for the theory of change.

Collaboration
Theoretical Proposition I:
Empower Collective Efficacy

Leadership
Theoretical Proposition II:
Prioritize clarity in vision, procedures, and expectations
Theoretical Proposition III:
Nurture systems of support
Theoretical Proposition IV:
Elevate teachers as leaders

Professional Learning
Theoretical Proposition V:
Expand opportunities for ongoing, shared learning
Theoretical Proposition VI:
Provide focused, connected content

Belief
Confidence
Motivation
Engagement

Creativity
Productivity
Persistence

Playful classroom environments
Powerful teacher-child interactions
Play integrated with curriculum content

Quality play experiences in support of children’s development and life-long learning

Figure 5.3
Limitations

I selected this group of teachers because I observed something special in their experience. I witnessed their professional capacity develop overtime through their unique experiences with leadership, professional learning, and collaboration. My goal was to learn about what made their experience effective. I met this goal. I did learn many important lessons from them that I will utilize throughout the rest of my career as an early childhood leader and professional developer.

Yet, it must be considered that the play leadership team’s experience was unique. This makes it unrealistic that this study could be replicated because it is unlikely that the “perfect storm” of professional capacity building structures with which these teachers engaged would be similar in another group. Few teachers have opportunities to engage as explicitly as teacher leaders. Few kindergarten teachers experience consistent professional learning content focused on early childhood practices and pedagogies. Few teachers are provided regular substitute teachers, affording them opportunities to engage frequently (with protected time) in shared work, shared learning, and development of community around a central passion.

Recommendations for Further Research

Recommendations developed directly from the data

This study utilized the High-Quality Purposeful Play Self-Assessment to illustrate that a group of teachers demonstrated proficiency with guided play practices and then sought to understand what built their professional capacity for play. During her interview, teacher D explained “it's been fun to watch our kids grow and I feel like we reap the
benefits when you see their math growth. That's not the only way to see growth, but our principal gets really excited because our kids, a lot of our kids are meeting their growth goals. I think a lot of it has to do with the fact that we let them play.” It would be an interesting study to utilize the self-assessment to demonstrate teacher play proficiency and compare teachers’ level of play proficiency with child outcomes, both academic and developmental.

It was interesting that all 7 participants reported that they perceived their principal as supportive of play in their kindergarten classrooms. This is not the narrative that is commonly heard. The common tale is that principals and other administrators lack respect for play and therefore teachers shy away from promoting children’s engagement in play in kindergarten. “Very few principals have professional backgrounds in early childhood, PreK, or Kindergarten, and principal preparation programs rarely close this gap in their knowledge. As a result, some principals may have inappropriate expectations of PreK and Kindergarten students, and may push teachers to teach in ways that do not engage young children or take into account their stage of development” (Mead, 2011, p. 6). It would be an interesting study to survey principal-teacher pairs to gauge levels of support and understanding of play practices. It would be interesting to utilize the play self-assessment to directly examine how a principal’s support of play influences a teacher’s play proficiency.

All of the participants reported that it was difficult to meet the expected 60 minute time allotment for play. The school district provided the guide for play, time allotments expectation, kindergarten look fors, some play trainings, and $300 a year for play materials for each kindergarten classroom in the school district. It would be interesting to
study how well teachers and principals across the district follow the guidelines laid out in these resources.

The director of elementary education in this school district emerged in the data as significant in influencing the participants’ guided play practices. She was described as passionate, encouraging, and highly involved with the play leadership team. Interviewing her to gain her perspectives of the Transforming Kindergarten project and the play leadership team experience would add a wonderful and informative layer to this study. Interviewing the principals from the participants’ schools about their perspectives of the project and how it has impacted the kindergarten classrooms in their building would also be enlightening. Another interesting perspective that could be gained from both district and building administrators would be to learn their perspectives about the barriers to guided play implementation.

Each of the participants shared their wishes for purposeful play, leadership, professional learning, and collaboration. It would be interesting to explore these wishes by seeking perspectives from teachers, principals, and district administrators about how these wishes could be brought to fruition.

**Recommendations derived from methodological, research design, or other limitations**

I would recommend that a future extension of the study would be to extend participation beyond the play leadership team to the full population of district kindergarten teachers. All teachers in this school district were exposed to the Transforming Kindergarten project. This study revealed what professional capacity building structures were effective for the play leadership team, but all teachers in the
district were exposed to many of these structures at varying degrees. For example, the play leadership team experienced drafting and revising components of the guide for play so they had a deep connection to the document. All district kindergarten teachers received the document so although their experience was not as intimate, they did have access. The same is the case for exposure to the passion of the director of elementary education, the $300 budget for play materials, and kindergarten focused professional learning through district trainings. Other kindergarten teachers did not have as frequent, consistent, or deep experiences as the play leadership team. It would be interesting to analyze how the lighter touch of the professional capacity building structures influenced the guided play practices district-wide. It would be interesting to compare the progress of the play leadership team with the other kindergarten teachers to learn about how the intensity of these structures affects the level of influence.

The High-Quality Purposeful Play Self-Assessment has potential to prompt teacher reflection and be utilized as a tool for instructional coaching focused on guided play practices. To be utilized in future research, it would be recommended to refine and validate this as a reliable tool so that it can be utilized more broadly in research.

**Conclusion**

This study looked at what professional capacity building structures influenced the guided play implementation of kindergarten teachers. The most significant influencer for the participants was collective efficacy. The strength and momentum they found in collective efficacy was brought to fruition through clear vision and focus, systems of
support, opportunities for the teachers to act as leaders, consistent shared learning experiences, and focused evidence-based professional learning content.

This study provides important learning for school systems seeking to build the professional capacity of teachers aimed at implementing any practice or skill. Prioritize protected time and space for teachers to learn, plan, work, and reflect together about quality teaching practices. Clearly communicate what quality classroom practices look like and how to make them happen. Empower teachers as leaders and experts to build their confidence and strengthen their resolve toward reaching high expectations for teaching and learning. Ensure that teachers have access to ongoing, connected professional learning experiences with evidence-based content so that they are able to expand their professional knowledge base and take action in their classrooms with what is most effective in support of children’s learning and development.
Chapter 6: The Researcher’s Story

I played a role in the Transforming Kindergarten project with this school district from the beginning, including doing some of the thinking and writing included in the guide for play. I participated in early meetings with teachers when the project was getting started. I developed and facilitated the ongoing professional learning workshops for the play leadership team, so was (and continue to be) fully engaged as a partner and observer of the participants’ journey to elevate guided play practices in kindergarten.

I chose to do this study because of my love for the project and my intellectual curiosity about what made the experience so powerful. I have found the journey with my study to be an exciting and illuminating experience. I am deeply affected by what I have learned from the teachers, but something was still missing. Without sharing my own story and perspective, I felt a lingering sense of dissatisfaction.

As part of my research tradition in chapter 3 describing my methodology, I shared the quotation, “Constructionists believe that the researcher cannot maintain a detached or objective position, and they believe that both the researcher and the subject should actively collaborate in the meaning-making process. Thus, researchers and participants are co-constructors of knowledge rather than conveyors and receivers of it” (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013, p. 62). I believed this while organizing my study, but found the intensity of this truth even stronger while reflecting on the collected data.

I have included a chapter 6 as part of my dissertation because as I reflected on the findings, focused on writing my discussion, and generated my grounded theory it occurred to me that my role in the project provided me a unique lens on the work. My own perspectives are not directly connected to the collected data, but they are relevant to
my study because my approach to data collection and analysis was through a social constructionism paradigm (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013). Taking time to explore my own observations in connection with the data is relevant to me personally in answering my research questions. It is important to me (the researcher) to reflect upon how what I learned from the study is connected to my own experiences, observations, and perceptions of the work. Chapter 6 is about engaging in deeper reflection and completing my study with a sense of satisfaction.

**Reflexivity**

I feel a strong sense of connection with the teachers and leaders. Like them, I have also experienced a journey over time with my own play practices through my roles as an early childhood teacher, coach, facilitator, and specialist. Although throughout my career, I always prioritized a significant amount of time for children’s play, the quality of my play practices and environments developed over time through my ongoing interactions with leadership, professional learning, and collaboration.

Like the teachers in this study, I consistently worked for supportive principals, was impacted by resources provided me by my school district, was influenced by ongoing professional learning experiences, and found opportunities for growth through conversations and shared work with colleagues. I would not be the educator I am today without my early experiences working in childcare (a place where play is valued), my first principal (an early childhood enthusiast), the many teachers who served as my mentors (as well as the ones I mentored myself), and a collection of colleagues who believed in play for kindergarteners even when elementary expectations pushed back.
Another important reflexivity consideration about me is that I have had significant experience and training as a coach. Quality coaching involves deep and personal engagement as a reflective practitioner. Quality coaching practices include observing details, actively listening to the coachee’s perspective, prompting the coachee to dig deeper into his/her own reflections, continuously reflecting upon and refining one’s own perspective, and offering refined perspective to the coachee to advance his/her thinking and actions (April et al., 2013; Knight, 2016).

These practices permeate how I function as a professional so they continued to emerge for me throughout my experience as a researcher in phase of this study. Like a researcher with a study, a coach must separate him/herself from the coachee to ensure that the coachee’s perspectives and needs rise to the surface. A coach has a responsibility to add value to the coachee’s learning and development, just as a researcher has responsibility to add value to the learning found in the study. It is my hope that this chapter 6 honors this responsibility and satisfies my urge for continued reflection.

**Personal Perspectives on the Grounded Theory**

What my unique lens can provide is additional perspective, deeper personal understanding, and advice on what supports to put in place (that are not as clearly visible through the teachers’ lens) to bring this experience to fruition in another school district, school, and classrooms. My study focused on what the teachers perceived as influencing their implementation of guided play practices. This focus embodied my primary curiosity and my most important learning. However, my own perceptions add a layer to this story that can provide additional insights for future work.
What emerged most strongly from the teachers was the power of collective efficacy. Their perspectives taught me so much that will guide and strengthen my future work. I now have a much deeper understanding of the critical importance of saving time and space for teachers to collaborate and develop power through collective efficacy. There are many connections in the literature that will guide and deepen this work for me. “When a team of individuals share the belief that through their unified efforts they can overcome challenges and produce intended results, groups are more effective” (Donohoo et al., 2018). I will ensure that all of my future work with educators gives weight to this critical element.

Before the study, my hypothesis was that leadership, professional learning, and collaboration would all emerge as equally important influencers in kindergarten teachers’ implementation of guided play practices. To echo the puzzle piece analogy used in chapter 5, I expected these to come together like puzzle pieces to create a complete picture confirming my own ideas, while also adding to my depth of understanding about what elements of these structures were most important.

Although elements of each professional capacity building structure did emerge from the data, they did not emerge as equally sized and distributed pieces of the puzzle. If the data were to be assembled in the form of a puzzle, pieces that represent collaboration would create the focal picture. Pieces that represent leadership and professional learning would create the borders. This visualization supported me to reach a new depth of understanding. Opportunities for collaboration was the main idea of the story. How leadership and professional learning supported, encouraged, and facilitated the collaboration acted as essential supporting details.
During my data analysis, I very much identified with the teachers’ perceptions and the findings that were rising to the surface. (I frequently found myself saying, “Yes! I can relate to that!”). When writing my discussion, I began to think more deeply about what I learned from the teachers’ perceptions. I began to compare what I thought I knew about the project with the data presented in the interviews. (During this phase, I frequently found myself saying, “Yes! I can relate to that AND…”). I wondered why my experience with the same project and my parallel experiences with the teachers yielded some distinct perspectives. While writing the discussion, I kept myself in check by reminding myself that I functioned as an observer and a partner in the project, not a direct participant. The teachers’ experiences with the project were much more intimate and personal than my own. Developing a grounded theory required remaining true and focused on their perceptions, while setting my own to the side.
While the reality of their experience must rise to the top as the most important learning from the study, my story provides additional context about what happened behind the scenes to advance the project. These observations may not have been as visible or prominent in the teachers’ perspectives because of the different roles we played in the project. These observations demonstrate efforts this school district put in place to bring to life the influences on teachers’ implementation of guided play practices. They are not directly part of the grounded theory that emerged in my study, but they are important to me personally in answering my research questions.

My personal role as partner and observer in the Transforming Kindergarten project was different from that of the teachers. Another differing factor involves my personal journey as an educator. In addition to my teaching experience, I have served in formal roles as an instructional leader and professional developer. I have studied educational leadership in my doctoral program. I believe that my experiences, study, and direct knowledge of the literature affect the lens from which I look at leadership, professional learning, and collaboration. Because of these factors, it is only natural that elements of these professional capacity building structures would rise to the surface for me in ways they might not for a kindergarten teacher who has had fewer opportunities to experience, study, plan, and reflect upon what influences building professional capacity.

I am using the opportunity of this additional chapter to highlight what I observed and learned through my own lens that connected with the data, but did not directly emerge from the data. The purpose is to explore my own experience as part of the Transforming Kindergarten project and add an additional layer of understanding to inform future efforts aimed at elevating guided play practices.
Reflections on the Theoretical Propositions

#1- Empower Collective Efficacy

Research suggests that collaborative teams that include people in different roles and with different perspectives are essential in developing early childhood systems that improve services, achieve better outcomes, and eliminate disparities in opportunities and achievement. When working together within the school and beyond, educators and their partners can better problem solve, share ideas, provide and receive emotional support, and gain confidence during the challenging work of strengthening systems for children and families (Donohoo et al., 2018; New et al., 2009; Noguera & Noguera, 2018; Walker & Riordan, 2010).

In my role as a partner, I experienced this collective efficacy research in action. I feel so proud to have been included in collaboration with these educators aimed at implementing practices and resulting in empowering emerging leaders to do great work for children. I was a part of their learning community and am grateful that they let me in to their circle. I will be forever impacted by (1) my experiences with the play leadership team, (2) the Transforming Kindergarten project as a whole, and (3) my learning through this study. I experienced transformational learning about collaboration and the true power of collective efficacy.

#2- Prioritize Clarity in Vision, Priorities, Procedures, and Expectations

The teachers in the study found opportunities to learn about and plan for play, coupled with extended time to reflect as influential. This is positively correlated with my
own beliefs about the value of reflective practice, but it did help me take my own understanding to a higher level. At my core, I am a coach. I believe that instructional practices grow most effectively when the teacher has an opportunity to engage in cycles of learning, planning, action, reflection, and evaluation. Educators rarely have an opportunity to develop in this way. Before I engaged in the data analysis, I assumed that coaching was the only effective way to save space for this developmental approach within our current organization of schools. The teachers have pushed me to think differently. I now see that collaboration with other dedicated colleagues, coupled with shared learning and planning can save a similar space for full cycles of learning and development.

Evidence demonstrates that continuous learning, connected experiences, coaching support, inquiry, and reflection shared with colleagues are effective at changing teacher practice when used in combination (Sawyer & Ramirez Stukey, 2019). These combined components of professional learning provide support, deepen, and extend educators’ engagement in learning, as well as connect professional learning experiences to day-to-day practice. Research shows that when educators engage in cycles of learning they are more likely to move beyond being able to simply comprehend new concepts to being able to effectively implement new ideas and practices that promote children’s learning and development (Learning Forward, 2011b). Ongoing, connected cycles of learning were influential.

There is more to the Powerful Interactions professional learning story than what was explored in chapter 5 as Theoretical Proposition V: opportunities to engage in shared learning with focused and connected content. The 3-step formula: be present, connect,
and extend provided the teachers with a vision for what their role in children’s play looked like, how to prioritize their time during play, what procedures they could follow to engage in quality interactions with children, and what they could expect of themselves during the time allotted for children’s play. When I organized the learning for the teachers based upon their chosen content, I explicitly connected the learning to the context of a Powerful Interaction, relevance to guided play, and how the learning in each of the quarterly workshops were interconnected. Not only did Powerful Interactions provide excellent content the teachers could connect with and utilize, the ongoing connections to the ideas helped the teachers to bring their understanding of the content into their daily practice. This is important because “learning designs that engage adult learners in applying the processes they are expected to use facilitate the learning of those behaviors by making them more explicit” (Learning Forward, 2011a, p. 2).

It pleases me that how to be present, connect, and extend learning through interactions with children stuck with the teachers. Some of the teachers also shared their value of the questioning and staging the play environment workshops, but what did not emerge as strongly from the data was the interconnectivity of each learning focus. I believe that it mattered that all topics were connected and provided by the same facilitator. I believe that the reason Powerful Interactions stuck out the most was because it was a consistent topic of conversation and was consistently connected to the learning in each workshop that followed. It mattered that the professional learning content was integrated and revisited with continuity over time.
#3- Nurture Systems of Support

Another important aspect of leadership that emerged from the data was the value of systems of support. The actions this school district took to build momentum for the Transforming Kindergarten project demonstrated systems of support aimed at empowering the teachers as masterful practitioners and building the capacity of the teachers as leaders. The intentional efforts made are connected to research on highly effective schools which shows that expanding leadership roles among school staff is beneficial. It creates a strong infrastructure of support (Tooley & Connally, 2016).

I witnessed the efforts district administrators made to foster teacher leadership and provide meaningful engagement for the group. The chart, Structural Supports connects what I observed to an article by Stephen Newton. The efforts these district leaders made may have been in the background and not as clear to the teachers, but enough cannot be said about the quality of their work and the influence their efforts had on the play leadership team.
# Table 6.1- Structural Supports

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Essential Practices</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Related experience for play leadership team</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. Meet in the Trenches | • Frequent instructional conversations between administrators and teachers  
• Administrators position themselves to listen to and learn from the teachers | School district leaders attended meetings side by side with the play leadership team. They took the stance to learn from them and with them. They viewed the play leadership team as kindergarten experts and spent these days prioritizing teacher voice. |
| 2. Move Beyond Department Chairs | • Administrators ask teachers to be part of committee work focused on solving important, complex problems (versus managerial, compliance-oriented tasks). | Each teacher on the team was invited to be a member. Engagement activities involved deep thinking about play, planning for play experiences, writing and presenting to communicate their thinking with all district teachers and administrators. |
| 3. Identify a Problem, Find an Expert | • Ask critical questions that need solving  
• Harness teachers’ curiosity and passion in their leadership role | The teachers on the team were all passionate about elevating play practices for their students and in their district. Two critical questions were asked of the team, (1) What does quality play look like? and (2) How can quality play be connected to curriculum? |
| 4. Create New Space | • Administrators carve out time and place for teachers to emerge as leaders. | The district administrators provided substitute teachers quarterly for each teacher and reserved space for teachers to engage in their collaborative work. |
| 5. Occupy Vacant Land | • Administrators are patient, keeping in mind that deep learning and change take time.  
• They start small and nurture teacher leaders knowing that they will grow and extend their influence. | From the beginning, the administrators explained that they knew it would take time for the teachers to develop play in their classrooms. They told the teachers not to feel pressured to be model classrooms right away, but to give themselves time to learn and try new things. Over time, the teacher leaders took on tasks of presenting at curriculum day events and planning a play conference. Together with administrators, they continue to develop play practices and brainstorm ways to serve as leaders for teachers across the district. |

Adapted from (Newton, 2017)

#4- Elevate Teachers as Leaders

An important aspect of leadership that emerged from the data was the value teachers placed on being perceived as leaders themselves. This finding was explored and noted in chapter 5 as theoretical proposition III. The participants were selected as teacher
leaders and they discussed the meaningfulness of this role in a variety of ways. From my perspective, they were humble about this aspect of the work in their interviews, focusing more attention on their students and their colleagues.

Because of my unique role as a partner and observer, I had my own lens and perspective on the teachers as leaders. I witnessed the teachers function as leaders, learners, and collaborators as they built capacity over time. I witnessed their commitment and passion for developing resources and tools, planning meaningful professional development experiences, presenting at district events, and continuing to brainstorm ways to engage more of their colleagues in collaboration. The quality of their guided play practices was advanced not only by being perceived as a leader, but also by their ongoing efforts to elevate quality and reflect upon practice because of their leadership responsibilities.

Elevating teacher leadership and fostering the quality of the teacher leader’s practice is beneficial. The principle of leaders among equals empowers people and ensures continuity through the following dynamics:

- Authority comes from the group, which takes precedence over the individual leader.
- Leaders are chosen because of their character, including honesty, humility, and generosity.
- Leaders inspire people to identify with them by setting an example.
- A leader serves something greater than himself— the mission, cause, or well-being of the community.
- The leader plays by the rules” (Bordas, 2012, p. 86).

#5- Expand opportunities for ongoing, shared learning

In my role as an observer of collaboration, I noticed great synergy in the group and perceived that they were the most engaged professional learning participants I ever
had the pleasure to facilitate. What I didn’t know from my lens was what made this synergy and engagement so powerful. I learned through the interview process that this synergy was due to the strong sense of community among the teachers that led to active collaboration and collective efficacy in both implementing their own and advancing other’s guided play practices. This was explored in chapter 5 as theoretical proposition I, empower collective efficacy. “Trust and collaboration are mutually reinforcing: the more parties work together, the greater opportunity they have to get to know one another and build trust” (Brewster & Railsback, 2003, p. 8). These teachers trusted and depended on one another, leading them to be effective collaborators.

A 2018 policy report highlighted elements of effective professional learning shown in the chart, Elements to Enhancing Effectiveness of Professional Learning (Lieberman et al., 2018). The teachers engaged in a wide variety of professional learning experiences, including in their school buildings, during district sessions, various formal/informal meetings as a team, their independent reading/study, the quarterly workshops, and their ongoing reflective communication with one another through text and email. In analyzing the perspectives of the participants and the school district documents (along with adding a layer of detail based upon my own perspective) it is my opinion that the play leadership team’s professional learning experiences included the elements of effective professional learning as described in this policy report. The various inputs, strategies, and contexts deepened and diversified their learning which led to advancement in their implement of guided play practices. This comprehensive approach to professional learning was influential.
Table 6.2 - Elements to Enhancing Effectiveness of Professional Learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Targets specific, focused, and clearly articulated evidence-based teaching practices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Often professional development programs stop at developing teacher knowledge. Effective programs build teachers' skills and competencies in addition to their knowledge by addressing practice. Effective programs also use reliable observation tools that have been shown to predict child learning outcomes to guide coaching and other professional learning efforts.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Provides sufficient intensity and duration to promote changes in practice</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Although there is not a defined amount of time necessary for effective professional development, research suggests that greater intensity and duration lead to more substantive changes in teacher practice. It takes time for teachers to change their practice, and positive child outcomes are often not apparent right away. These outcomes often occur over time as teachers hone their competencies and skills.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Uses strategies most likely to change classroom behavior</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Generally, effective professional development uses methods that actively engage teachers in learning and reflective experiences that lead to change in their daily classroom behavior. However, more research is needed to determine what specific components of professional development and coaching lead to changes in teaching practices. Programs often include the use of data gleaned from systematic observations of teachers working with children, verbal feedback, modeling, written feedback, role play.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


(Lieberman et al., 2018, p. 11)

#6- Provide focused, connected content

The teachers in the study reported that the Powerful Interactions (Dombro et al., 2011a) focused professional learning was the most impactful. Upon reflection, it is not surprising that this learning is what rose to the surface for the teachers. My own story with Powerful Interactions is important because it illuminates my own personal investment and belief in this technique, expanding its level of effectiveness for the teachers’ learning. In my first experiences coaching teachers, I noticed that most struggled to engage in meaningful interactions with children in support of playful learning. When I was first introduced to Powerful Interactions, it felt like just the right fit
to develop this phenomenon. After a time, I was able to participate in a variety of workshops with one of the authors, Judy Jablon and received some direct support from her focused on my own coaching practices.

The teachers’ focus on Powerful Interactions was facilitated with continuity over time, as well as my own passion, depth of knowledge, and personal experience. This investment and knowledge base of the facilitator, as well as the integration with a variety of learning concepts over time are important considerations in the development of future effective professional learning to influence practice implementation.

Before the play leadership team was formed, I was coaching at 2 of the district buildings. To support kindergarten teachers to elevate play, I facilitated some Powerful Interactions coaching and professional learning sessions with these teachers. It was these teachers who suggested me as a presenter at an upcoming curriculum day where I facilitated a Powerful Interactions workshop for all district kindergarten teachers. This led to my invitation to facilitate learning for the newly formed play leadership team.

The play leadership team maintained a voice in what learning would be most beneficial for their practice. For each workshop, the teachers selected the content focus. I developed the sessions based upon their interests and focused on the real-world application in the classrooms (workshop sessions are represented in the chart included as Appendix 2: The Play Leadership Team’s Shared Professional Learning Experiences). I believe that it mattered that the teachers had agency in selecting the topics. “To create the space for collaborative leadership, we must have confidence in teachers. Principals must honor teachers’ ability to drive their own professional development and choose the form of growth that will work for them” (Cody, 2013, p. 70).
The participants’ in this study engaged in ongoing and connected learning in community with one another. The participants in this study engaged in ongoing, connected learning through quarterly workshops. Some had coaching support around new learning. They all had time to reflect, plan, and learn from each other to implement new their ideas and practices.

**Summary**

My most important take away from my experience with the Transforming Kindergarten project and this study involves clarity about the value of collaboration and the true power of collective efficacy. What I understand now is that time and space for this most critical influencer needs to be a priority, but it cannot happen in a vacuum. School leaders play a critical role in paving the way.

The collection of theoretical propositions and theory of change that emerged from this study illustrate what school leaders can do to stimulate and support the primary theoretical proposition, (1) empower collective efficacy. School leaders can focus attention on the following: (2) prioritize clarity in vision, priorities, procedures, and expectations; (3) nurture systems of support; (4) elevate teachers as leaders; (5) expand opportunities for ongoing, shared learning; and (6) provide focused, connected professional learning content.

Teachers’ capacity to engage in collaborative work and collective commitment toward a shared mission can be advanced by activating these influential, supporting elements of professional capacity building. In essence, how school leaders implement
leadership practices influences teachers’ collective efficacy which influences their implementation of teaching practices. It’s all interconnected.

**Personal Reflection about the Study**

I read a blog once about how writing a story is like making a quilt (Vetsch, 2018). *Walking into the quilt shop and starting the story* is where it all begins. For me, the story began during my doctoral coursework. There were many questions to ask and potential studies to explore. I chose to begin with my son, Aidan and his kindergarten experience. This determined the pattern and the fabric of my study. Having *the right tools makes all the difference* in quilt making. My academic and professional journeys provided me the tools needed to tell a story in the form of a research study. Making a great quilt involves *expressing your unique creativity*. This element of quilt making is a parallel to the role the participants played in telling the story. They experienced something unique and magical. They shared this magic with me so that I could answer my research questions and learn from their perspectives. A great quilt needs a template to begin (the methodology of a study), but it is the uniqueness of the participants’ voices that create the beauty and depth in the story. A great quilt involves *personal touches that breathe life into the project*. Taking a constructivist approach provided space for me to reflect upon my own observations and experiences. This enhanced my learning and brought life to the story of my study.

The art of quilting has stood the test of time because throughout history it has been “rooted in necessity (need for bedcovers and warmth), economy (reusing scraps and
discarded fabric), and ultimately the need for human self expression” (Parsons, 2017). This is a parallel for both educational research and practice.

It is the researcher’s hope that a study is *rooted in necessity*, making an important and informed contribution to the field of practice. I feel this way about my study. I believe that elevating the implementation of guided play practices in kindergarten is a necessity and I am hopeful that this study will help build momentum in the work.

Like a quilt, a great study is *rooted in economy* by providing sound advice for where educators can best focus limited funds and precious time. I believe that the theoretical propositions and theory of change that emerged in this study provide guidance on how to efficiently and effectively influence the implementation of guided play practices in kindergarten.

The *need for human self expression* is a factor for both researchers and practitioners. My journey with this study satisfied this need in me. I have been able to describe the value of play in kindergarten, the role educational systems play in either elevating or undermining play practices, and how to build the professional capacity of teachers to provide great play experiences for young children. I was also able to tell my own professional story as an educator and observer, as well as my personal story with my son’s kindergarten experience.

Like the great quilts hung in history museums or laying lovingly on the beds of family members, it is my hope that this story stands the test of time for the broader field and provides support for the those of us who continue to play a part in the Transforming Kindergarten project.
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Specific time is designated daily for high quality purposeful play. This can also occur during instructional blocks.
- Student choice occurs daily.
- Outside play occurs daily (weather permitting).
- This time provides the opportunity for a balance between interacting and engaging with students during play and providing small group instruction and intervention.
- Play is tied to big ideas and essential questions and are changed regularly. Play is supported with intentional play.
- Play provides extensive opportunities for children to represent and extend their thinking and learning through multiple modalities (e.g., construction, drawing, writing, painting, movement, dance, drama).
- Play centers integrate multiple objectives, standards, and content areas naturally to support learning.
- Literacy and math should be integrated into all areas of play.
- Suggested play centers include the following: dramatic play, writing, blocks, discovery, math, art, library, and technology.

### High Quality Purposeful Play Self-Assessment

**Domain 1: High quality approaches to learning in purposeful play**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage 1</th>
<th>Stage 2</th>
<th>Stage 3</th>
<th>Stage 4</th>
<th>My Next Steps to Move Forward</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Play is currently not scheduled regularly.</td>
<td>Play is scheduled for 60 minutes but often students have less than 60 minutes.</td>
<td>Play is scheduled for 60 consecutive minutes and this time is protected from interruptions.</td>
<td>In addition to the 60-minute time allotment for purposeful play, playful learning and student choice opportunities are consistently integrated into other instructional times (Ex: reading, math, science, social studies).</td>
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</table>

**Student choice occurs daily.**

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<tr>
<th>Stage 1</th>
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<th>Stage 3</th>
<th>Stage 4</th>
<th>My Next Steps to Move Forward</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Staff decide where children play, what they play, how long they play, and with whom they play.</td>
<td>Students are provided limited opportunity for choice. (Ex: Students choose where to play, but teachers decide how long they play in that area).</td>
<td>Students choose where to play and for how long they engage in that center area.</td>
<td>Students choose where to play, for how long, and can carry over their work/projects/play into the next day.</td>
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</table>
Outside play occurs daily (weather permitting).

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<th>Stage 1</th>
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<th>Stage 4</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>□ Students rarely play outside.</td>
<td>□ Students play outside once a day.</td>
<td>□ Students play outside at least two times a day. □ The teacher focuses on supervision.</td>
<td>□ Students play outside at least twice a day and various materials are provided for creative play. □ Teachers engage in play with children as they supervise.</td>
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This time provides the opportunity for a balance between interacting and engaging with students during play and providing small group instruction and intervention. (Dombro et al., 2011b)

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<th>Stage 1</th>
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<th>My Next Steps to Move Forward</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>□ Staff regularly prepare materials and get ready for instruction or dismissal while children play. □ Interactions during the purposeful play block are primarily teacher-directed (Ex: all children must do the same activity in the same way; expectations are not based on children’s individual abilities or interests).</td>
<td>□ Staff supervise students during play by circulating around the room. □ There is some individualized teaching while children participate in free play. (Ex: sit at the art center and work with each child who comes to participate; sometimes moves to different areas to talk with children about their play).</td>
<td>□ Staff to student play interactions follow some of the steps in a powerful interaction: 1) be present, 2) connect with child, and 3) extend learning. (Ex: counts blocks with child who built a tower; shows child how to play sorting game; has conversation with child involved in dramatic play). □ At least one adult is engaged in purposeful play for the entire 60-minute block. □ The teacher provides 30 minutes of LLI and 30 minutes of interactions with children at play. □ The paraprofessional may engage in play with children for the full 60 minutes or may have a small group opposite the teacher’s LLI time. □ Staff observe children at play and record formative assessment data.</td>
<td>□ Staff to student play interactions follow all three steps in a powerful interaction: 1) be present, 2) connect with child, and 3) extend learning. □ Staff utilize formative assessment data to scaffold children’s learning during their play. □ Staff enhance children’s play without interrupting or taking over.</td>
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### Play is tied to big ideas and essential questions

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<th>Stage 4</th>
<th>My Next Steps to Move Forward</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>□ Materials are set out for play but are not tied to specific ideas found in the district’s guide for play.</td>
<td>□ Materials are set out for play and students are encouraged to play with intention as described in the district’s guide for play.</td>
<td>□ Play based centers are carefully planned and tied to big ideas and essential questions found in the district’s guide for play.</td>
<td>□ Open-ended play opportunities encourage creativity tied to big ideas and essential questions found in the district’s guide for play.</td>
<td>□ Children innovate play experiences by taking play to higher levels.</td>
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</table>

### Play materials are changed regularly.

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<th>Stage 1</th>
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<th>My Next Steps to Move Forward</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>□ Center materials remain the same for long periods of time.</td>
<td>□ Center materials are changed but experiences are not connected to big ideas and essential questions found in the district’s guide for play.</td>
<td>□ Center materials are changed at least quarterly. □ Changes in center materials are based upon student interest, as well as big ideas and essential questions found in the district’s guide for play.</td>
<td>□ Center materials are changed more frequently than quarterly in response to student interest. □ Play materials encourage open-ended opportunities for children to self-initiate deeper play (Ex: analysis and reasoning, higher-level thinking, problem-solving, and making personal connections/investigations to curriculum learning).</td>
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### Play is supported with intentionality.

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<th>My Next Steps</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>□ There are few expectations for quality of work or student achievement during purposeful play. □ Staff articulate expectations for quality of work and achievement during purposeful play, but certain groups of students are encouraged to achieve more than others.</td>
<td>□ Teachers use the district’s guide for play to develop centers.</td>
<td>□ Teachers use the district’s guide for play to develop centers and ensure that opportunities for play align with classroom instruction and student interest. □ Instructional goals, activities, interactions, and the classroom environment convey high expectations for student achievement during purposeful play for the whole class.</td>
<td>□ Teachers use the district’s guide for play to develop centers, ensure that opportunities for play align with classroom instruction and student interest, and use powerful interactions to enhance student learning during play. □ High expectations during purposeful play are a shared belief internalized by all students. Students assume responsibility for high quality work by initiating improvements, making revisions, and/or helping peers achieve.</td>
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</table>
Play provides extensive opportunities for children to represent and extend their thinking and learning through multiple modalities (e.g., construction, drawing, writing, painting, movement, dance, drama).

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<th>My Next Steps to Move Forward</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>☐ Providing opportunities to engage with multiple modalities (kinesthetic, visual, verbal, and auditory) are not intentionally considered or planned for in play centers.</td>
<td>☐ Play centers provide the opportunity to learn through a single modality (kinesthetic, visual, verbal, OR auditory).</td>
<td>☐ Some play centers provide opportunities for learning and exploration through multiple modalities (kinesthetic, visual, verbal, AND auditory), extending thinking and learning.</td>
<td>☐ Opportunities for learning and exploration through multiple modalities (kinesthetic, visual, verbal, AND auditory) are intentionally planned, encouraged, supported, and scaffolded through adult-child interactions in each play center.</td>
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</table>

- Play centers integrate multiple objectives/standards naturally to support learning.

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<th>Stage 1</th>
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<th>My Next Steps to Move Forward</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>☐ Play centers are not intentionally connected to objectives or state standards.</td>
<td>☐ Play centers are loosely connected to current learning objectives.</td>
<td>☐ Play centers are regularly connected with the current learning objectives.</td>
<td>☐ Play centers are clearly aligned to current learning objectives and state standards.</td>
<td>☐ Children can explain their how their play connects to current objectives.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Play centers integrate multiple content areas naturally to support learning.

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<tr>
<th>Stage 1</th>
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<th>My Next Steps to Move Forward</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>☐ Play center learning opportunities are seldom connected to content learning.</td>
<td>☐ Play center learning opportunities are connected to one specific content area.</td>
<td>☐ Play centers provide carefully planned opportunities to integrate learning for students through multiple content areas.</td>
<td>☐ Play centers provide opportunities to integrate learning for students through multiple content areas.</td>
<td>☐ Staff support children to make their own connections between playful learning activities and curriculum content by encouraging children's inquisitiveness and innovation (Ex: generating hypotheses, real life situations, analysis and reasoning, etc.).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Literacy and math should be integrated into all areas of play.

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<th>Stage 4</th>
<th>My Next Steps to Move Forward</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>☐ Play centers are seldom tied to literacy or math.</td>
<td>☐ Play centers are occasionally tied to either literacy or math.</td>
<td>☐ Opportunities for math and literacy are intentionally planned by the teacher and provided in each center.</td>
<td>☐ Opportunities for math and literacy are intentionally planned by the teacher and well developed in each center.</td>
<td>☐ The literacy and math opportunities are tied to current instruction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☐ Staff interact with children and encourage them to make their own literacy and math connections as they play.</td>
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</table>

### Children interact with peers

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<tr>
<th>Stage 1</th>
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<th>Stage 4</th>
<th>My Next Steps to Move Forward</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>☐ Children spend the majority of their time in teacher-directed instruction with minimal opportunities to interact with peers.</td>
<td>☐ Children have some time to select their own playmates.</td>
<td>☐ Peer interaction is evident during play.</td>
<td>☐ Staff point out children’s positive social behavior toward one another.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☐ Staff seldom provide guidance to support children’s positive peer interactions.</td>
<td>☐ Staff quickly stop hurtful peer interaction if it occurs.</td>
<td>☐ Staff generally help the children solve social problems in a way that is successful and satisfying to the children.</td>
<td>☐ Staff help children avoid conflicts (Ex: have a system for ensuring fair turns, such as a waiting list; provide enough popular choices during free play; notice when a problem is brewing and provide closer supervision).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☐ Staff seldom explicitly teach children how to positively interact with one another.</td>
<td>☐ Staff generally model good social skills (Ex: are rarely bossy; are polite; respond when others talk to them; do not hurt others physically or emotionally; are not irritable).</td>
<td>☐ Most peer interaction is positive, with few if any conflicts.</td>
<td>☐ Staff provide some opportunities for children to work together on a project (Ex: a group of children work to cover a large mural paper with many drawings; make soup with many ingredients; cooperate to set up obstacle course).</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### Domain 2: Developing and engaging with children in the purposeful play environment

- **Suggested play centers include the following** (Adapted from ECERS3 (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 2015);

  **Clearly defined interest centers.** "A play area is a space where play materials are provided for children to use. An interest center is a clearly defined play area for a particular kind of play" (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 2015).

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<tr>
<th>Stage 1</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Most play areas are small and crowded making play difficult.</td>
<td>- At least 2 play areas have sufficient space for the type of play encouraged by the materials.</td>
<td>- Space is arranged so that classroom pathways and other center areas do not interrupt play.</td>
<td>- Quiet and noisy play areas are all separated from one another, not just by furniture but by physical space.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Few play materials in the classroom are organized for children's independent use.</td>
<td>- Some play areas are accessible to enrolled children with disabilities.</td>
<td>- All play areas are accessible to enrolled children with disabilities.</td>
<td>- All play areas requiring special provisions are conveniently equipped (Ex: art and sand/water interest centers have easily cleaned surfaces and sink near-by; block center has rug to reduce noise).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Few play areas are accessible for enrolled children with disabilities requiring special accommodation.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Centers requiring more space (blocks, dramatic play, very popular or active play) have sufficient space to accommodate the type of play required.</td>
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### Dramatic play

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Materials for children to engage in sociodramatic play are unavailable, too few for the children in the center, or difficult for children to access independently.</td>
<td>- Some materials are provided for children to act out roles.</td>
<td>- Many materials are provided for children to engage in dramatic play (including dolls, child-sized furniture, play foods, cooking/eating utensils, dress-up clothes, and additional thematic materials).</td>
<td>- Staff consistently talk with children about math and literacy concepts in dramatic play in a way that is meaningful to the children daily (Ex. Discuss menus with prices for restaurants; help children make signs and price tags for store play).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Staff-child interactions in the dramatic play area are primarily focused on redirecting behavior.</td>
<td>- Staff are somewhat engaged with children in the center area.</td>
<td>- Staff engage in conversations with children's during their self-initiated play.</td>
<td>- Materials in the center represent diversity (including dolls of different races, multicultural food, etc.).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Blocks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage 1</th>
<th>Stage 2</th>
<th>Stage 3</th>
<th>Stage 4</th>
<th>My Next Steps to Move Forward</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>☐ Blocks are unavailable for children’s use.</td>
<td>☐ Enough blocks are accessible for at least 2 children to build sizeable independent structures at the same time.</td>
<td>☐ Enough space, blocks and accessories from 3 categories for 3 children to build sizeable independent structures at the same time.</td>
<td>☐ Staff consistently link literacy concepts to children’s block play (Ex: write children’s comments about what they have built; take photos and write captions).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☐ Staff-child interactions in the blocks area are primarily focused on redirecting behavior.</td>
<td>☐ Enough clear floor space for 2 children to build sizeable independent structures without interruption.</td>
<td>☐ Almost all blocks and accessories are stored on open, labeled shelves in a special area reserved for uninterrupted block play.</td>
<td>☐ Staff consistently point out the math concepts that are demonstrated in unit blocks in a way that interests children daily (Ex: discuss “more” and “less”, relationships in size or shape: “Look, these two squares make a rectangle, just like this one.”; number of blocks; measurement).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☐ Some accessories are available to enhance block play</td>
<td>☐ Some positive involvement by staff when children use blocks.</td>
<td>☐ Staff consistently have many conversations with interested children about their block play (Ex: ask questions about what children are building).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Accessory categories: 1) vehicles, 2) people, 3) animals

### Discovery (Science)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage 1</th>
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<th>My Next Steps to Move Forward</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>☐ Nature/science materials are unavailable for children’s use.</td>
<td>☐ At least 5 nature/science materials are available from 2 categories.</td>
<td>☐ Many nature/science materials are available with some from each of the 5 categories, including at least 5 nature/science books. (Sand/water can be counted as 1 of the materials).</td>
<td>☐ Staff consistently link literacy concepts to children’s discovery play.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☐ Staff seldom talk about nature/science with the children during purposeful play (Ex: mention weather, seasons; read factual book on animals; mention temperature of water).</td>
<td>☐ Staff talk about nature/science with the children.</td>
<td>☐ Staff consistently use and talk about nature/science materials with the children.</td>
<td>☐ Staff consistently engage with children in measuring, comparing, or sorting nature/science materials daily.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☐ Staff-child interactions in the discovery area are primarily focused on redirecting behavior.</td>
<td>☐ Sand or water with appropriate toys are accessible.</td>
<td></td>
<td>☐ One or more pets/plants are available that children can observe, help care for, and that are talked about with children daily.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discovery categories: 1) Living things children can observe closely or care for, 2) Natural objects, 3) Factual books/Nature-science picture games, 4) Nature/Science tools, 5) Sand or water toys
### Math

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage 1</th>
<th>Stage 2</th>
<th>Stage 3</th>
<th>Stage 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>□ Few math materials are available in the room for children to use in play.</td>
<td>□ At least 2 materials from each of the 3 categories are available, including some print numbers in display materials.</td>
<td>□ Many math materials are available, with at least 3 from each category and play materials that help show children meaning of print numbers.</td>
<td>□ Staff consistently relate math materials/activities to current topics of interest in the classroom. □ Staff consistently ask children questions about math materials/activities that stimulate reasoning (Ex: “What would happen if we put all the feathers on one side of the scale and a block on the other side?”).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Staff-child interactions during math play are primarily focused on redirecting behavior.</td>
<td>□ Staff sometimes give information or ask basic questions about math as children play with materials.</td>
<td>□ Staff frequently join in children’s play with math materials.</td>
<td>□ Staff consistently encourage use of math materials/activities AND help children use them successfully.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Math activities used engage most of the participating children.</td>
<td>□ Math activities used engage most of the participating children.</td>
<td>□ Math activities used engage most of the participating children.</td>
<td>□ Math activities used engage most of the participating children.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Math categories: 1) Counting/Comparing quantities, 2) Measuring/Comparing sizes and parts of whole (fractions), 3) Familiarity with shapes

### Art

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage 1</th>
<th>Stage 2</th>
<th>Stage 3</th>
<th>Stage 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>□ Art materials are rarely accessible to the children.</td>
<td>□ At least 1 drawing material is available. Children can independently access a sufficient number of crayons or markers (in usable condition) and paper.</td>
<td>□ At least 1 material from each category is accessible.</td>
<td>□ Staff consistently engage in the art center to teach children to use more complex art materials. □ Some art activities are related to current classroom themes or interests. □ Math and literacy concepts are consistently integrated into children’s art play.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Individual expression is seldom encouraged when children use art materials (Ex: coloring worksheets; each child produces same project where work of all children looks similar; children must follow an example).</td>
<td>□ Children engage in some individual expression with art materials.</td>
<td>□ Most art activities allow children to use materials in their own way.</td>
<td>□ Staff consistently have conversations with interested children about their work (Ex: “Tell me about your picture.” “How did you make that clay form?”).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Staff-child interactions in the art area are primarily focused on redirecting behavior.</td>
<td>□ Staff are positively involved with children using art materials.</td>
<td>□ Staff consistently have conversations with interested children about their work (Ex: “Tell me about your picture.” “How did you make that clay form?”).</td>
<td>□ Staff consistently engage in the art center to teach children to use more complex art materials. □ Some art activities are related to current classroom themes or interests. □ Math and literacy concepts are consistently integrated into children’s art play.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Art categories: 1) Drawing, 2) Paints, 3) 3-D, 4) Collage, 5) Tools
### Library

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<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>☐ Less than 10 books are accessible to children during play.</td>
<td>☐ Staff read a book with children at least once during play each day.</td>
<td>☐ Many books are accessible for children during play.</td>
<td>☐ A wide selection of books is available including books from a significant variety of topics.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☐ Staff seldom use books with children in the center area.</td>
<td>☐ Staff show some interest and enjoyment in books during purposeful play time.</td>
<td>☐ Books are organized in a defined reading center, with a place to store the books for easy access and a space with comfortable furnishing to use them.</td>
<td>☐ At least 5 books related to current classroom activities or themes are available.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☐ Staff reading or use of books with children is dull, disinterested, and/or unenthusiastic.</td>
<td>☐ Children show interest in accessible books.</td>
<td>☐ Staff consistently show positive interest when children choose to use books independently.</td>
<td>☐ Books are displayed in order to encourage book use (Ex: books not crowded on shelf; many covers easily seen).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>☐ Staff consistently read books to children during play each day.</td>
<td></td>
<td>☐ Staff consistently use books with children to help answer questions and to provide information on things that children are curious about.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Possible topics include: differing abilities, different cultures, different races, feelings, health, jobs/work, males and females, math, nature/science, people, sports/hobbies

### Technology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>☐ Content of material used in electronic media is not developmentally appropriate (Ex: violent content; frightening characters or stories; TV program is racially prejudicial; computer game too difficult).</td>
<td>☐ All materials used are nonviolent, culturally sensitive, and appropriate for the children in the group.</td>
<td>☐ Materials encourage problem-solving rather than rote or random response from children (Ex: encourage matching, sequencing, making thoughtful decisions).</td>
<td>☐ Available electronic media encourages creativity or vigorous movement (Ex: creative drawing/painting program on tablet; participate in dance or exercise video).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☐ Children frequently use electronic media for more than 30 minutes.</td>
<td>☐ Staff occasionally check to make sure children are on-task while engaging in electronic media.</td>
<td>☐ Electronic media use limited to 15 minutes per child.</td>
<td>☐ Electronic media materials are connected to curriculum and lessons learned in direct instruction.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☐ Staff are seldom involved with children during use of electronic media beyond starting the equipment.</td>
<td></td>
<td>☐ Electronic media available as one of many free play activities.</td>
<td>☐ Electronic media materials promote mastery of state standards.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Domain 3: Representing diversity in the purposeful play environment

**Representing diversity in the purposeful play environment** Adapated from ECERS3 (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 2015):

- **Promoting diversity: Books, displayed pictures, and play materials**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage 1</th>
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<th>My Next Steps to Move Forward</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>□ Few examples of diversity found in available books, displayed pictures, OR play materials.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Materials present stereotypes of races, cultures, ages, ability, and gender roles.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Purposeful play areas include examples of racial/cultural diversity in available books, displayed pictures, OR play materials.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Materials show diversity in a positive way.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Staff usually allow both boys and girls to follow their interests, despite the gender stereotypes associated with some toys and activities.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Purposeful play areas include at least 2 of the 5 types of diversity in available books, displayed pictures, AND play materials.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ There are at least 10 easily visible positive examples of diversity.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Purposeful play areas include at least 4 of the 5 types of diversity in available books, displayed pictures, AND play materials.</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Inclusion of diversity is part of learning activities. (Ex: sing songs in more than one language; play music from varying cultures; use sign language for some words).</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Staff consistently have positive conversations with children discussing the benefits of similarities and differences among people.</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Types of diversity: 1) race, 2) culture, 3) age, 4) differing abilities, 5) non-traditional gender role
A Guided Play Checklist for Teachers

- Do I know and understand each child well enough to respond meaningfully to individual abilities and needs?
- Do I set purposeful learning goals for materials and activities and know which areas of development and content skills will be supported?
- Do play themes, books, props, and other materials and learning opportunities support the language and cultural experiences of the children and their families?
- Do materials and conversations increase children’s attention and persistence?
- Do I see how the activity strengthens executive function skills and self-regulation?
- Do I notice the way children’s skills change over time and update materials to ensure increasingly complex challenges to keep pace with their needs? Do I share with families why we do what we do in the classroom and sincerely seek their input?
- Do I observe carefully, noticing what works well and what needs to be adjusted to foster greater engagement? Do I provide feedback that offers information or vocabulary that helps children dig deeper in understanding?
- Do I use open-ended questioning to draw children into conversations and encourage their ideas and explanations?
- Do I listen to and notice children’s words, interactions with others, and emerging skills? Do I capture these through written notes, photographs, videos, and samples of children’s work? Do I share the excitement of what children are learning with their families?
- Do I introduce and model rich, descriptive vocabulary in a variety of ways during play, reading, and daily activities? Do I introduce props that invite children to understand the meaning of new words and act these out during play?
- Do I encourage flexibility, empathy, cooperation, collaboration, and problem-solving skills as children engage with their peers?
- Do I reflect with my co-teachers on the effectiveness of playful learning and plan action steps for positive change?
- Do I talk with families about their goals for children, ask about the child’s home experiences, and invite contributions to play themes and materials?
Appendix 3: Member Checking Graphic Organizer

Teacher Name: 

Interview Date: 

Reflections

The categories included below in bold face and italics (and parenthesis) are common themes and (sub-themes) that are arising in teacher interviews. As you read through these, please insert comments to share your reactions and add details about your thinking. To do this: highlight the section you would like to comment on, select the “Insert” tab, select “Comment,” and type your thoughts into the comment section (Insert>Comment). Please share details that are important to you and consider the questions provided (in blue).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purposeful Play Practices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-Assessment Thinking</strong>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elevating Time for Play (children’s play, teachers’ involvement in play) -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elevating Intentionality (interactions, planning, academic learning, environment) –</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How else has your play changed through your engagement in the Transforming Kindergarten work?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Whole Child Development (social, emotional, cognitive, language, physical) – | 
| • Is there anything you would like to add about how play in your classroom supports children’s development? | 

| Leadership | 
| District (Clear message, OPS Guide for Play, $300 Budget) - | 
| Principal (Trust, Paraprofessionals, Time to collaborate, Time to plan, Materials) – | 
| • What role does a principal play in influencing play practices? | 
| Teacher (Being Acknowledged as leader, District Planning for Play Guide, PD Blast, Presenting at Curriculum Day, Planning the Play Conference) – | 
| • How has being a teacher leader impacted your own classroom play practices? | 

| Early Childhood Instructional Leadership (knowledgeable) – | 
| • What are your thoughts about the impact of instructional leaders who have expertise in early childhood? | 

| Collaboration | 
| Teacher Community (Inspire, learn, support, motivate, balance, grace) – | 
| • Is there anything else you would like to share about the power of engagement in a teacher community? | 

| Time - | 
| Plan - | 
| Collective Commitment – | 
| • How would you describe the collective commitment of host team? | 

| Support – | 
| • How has the host team provided you with emotional or concrete support? |
### Professional Learning

**Transforming Kindergarten**

**Early Childhood Focused** (coaching, content)

**Preservice and Graduate Work**

**Learning that is interactive, visual, and hands-on**

### Time -

**Content** (Reflect upon the chart below. This includes a checklist for teachers to evaluate play in their classrooms. On the sides you will see how the professional learning experiences we have engaged in as a group are connected.) –

- View and reflect upon the chart, The Play Leadership Team’s Shared Professional Learning Experiences. It involves a checklist for teachers to evaluate play in their classrooms. On the sides you will see how the professional learning experiences we have engaged in as a host team are connected to what is important according to this article. **What content has been important for your learning? What content do you think is most important to provide other teachers that have not yet experienced these professional learning opportunities?**

### Barriers

- 

### Wishes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purposeful Play</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Additional Thoughts

- **What is important to you that has not yet been discussed? What has influenced you to implement purposeful play practices in your classroom?**